Kappeler, Susanne. "From Sexual Politics to Body Politics (1994)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 104–111. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-014>>.

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14. From Sexual Politics to Body Politics (1994)

Susanne Kappeler

Given the extraordinary vagaries of the term ‘sexual politics’ in recent times, I want to ask how feminism — a politics of women’s liberation — is meant simultaneously to participate in an academic discourse centred on pleasure and the body.

The feminism of the 1970s put its emphasis squarely on sexual politics. Kate Millett’s renowned book of that title signalled a new clarity about how the social inequality of women is to be analysed and understood. ‘The personal is political’ — i.e. the sexual/sexuality is where women individually experience collective oppression by men. While the relations of power between men and women are analytically comparable to other systems of oppression, such as class or race, the oppression of women by men is characterised by the fact that individual members of the opposing groups live together intimately, in the way a capitalist and a worker rarely do, and a master and slave only do if the master is a man and the slave is a woman whom he also sexually exploits. Men not only have power over women, they also desire them. Women are the collective sex object of men’s collective sexual subjectivity. This says nothing as yet, of course, about the sexual practice and experience of individuals; it is an analysis of the collective relations between the sexes in the system we call patriarchy.

It is significant, therefore, that in the early 1980s, especially in academic practice, the concept of ‘sexual politics’ was increasingly replaced by the concept of ‘sexual difference’. Sexual difference is the conventional term, used in psychoanalysis, medicine and biology, denoting a given biological difference between the sexes. Most of those who speak of sexual difference had never talked of sexual politics, since psychoanalysis, like other dominant discourses, is firmly grounded in patriarchal ideology. What is interesting, however, is that women — who *had* been speaking of sexual politics — took over this analysis of sexual difference, trying to participate in both malestream academicism and feminism by mixing feminism and post-structuralism.

Intellectual fashions are neither neutral nor ungendered, and are as much a matter of politics as anything else. Like ordinary fashions, they are *made*, produced and

disseminated by interest groups in society. We need to analyse them both in terms of their cultural-historical significance and their provenance, that is to say, in terms of a politics of discourse. From that point of view, concepts, terminology and discursive habits are not just a matter of stylistic choice, but carry analytical, theoretical and political significance. Yet the social nature of discourse is such that we may acquire discursive habits and adopt particular terminologies and expressions, not because we are persuaded of their theoretical appropriateness, but just because they seem to be the terms currently most available.

When white male academics, following Foucault & co, started to foreground the body, that emphasis also began to exert pressure on the language of feminists. We can see this for instance in Maria Mies's book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*. Mies calls one of her chapters 'Body politics', even though what she discusses are in fact the central points of the sexual politics of the feminist movement: campaigns against abortion laws, the critique of the family and family law, the campaign against sexual violence, projects of building refuges for battered women, rape crisis centres, safe houses for children who have been sexually assaulted, etc. It is curious to call these, as Mies does, 'issues which were all in one way or the other connected with the *female body*' (p.24). You might equally say that they are all in one way or another connected with *women*; you might even say that they are connected, not just in one way or another, but in specific ways, to men.

If it is already a problem to call these issues 'women's issues', it is even more problematic to call them issues concerning the female body, for there is no living body of a woman without the woman. What men apparently do to women's bodies they are doing to women. And while many women may learn to bear what is done to their bodies, they do not learn to bear what is being done to *them*. A person may learn to bear the violence done to their body, but a person cannot bear the violation of their person. Which is why feminism is not a branch of medicine, healing the female body, but a politics fighting for women's human rights, their rights to personhood.

This is not just a linguistic quibble, it is the very crux of women's history in patriarchy. Women in our culture have been seen primarily as bodies — sexual bodies designed for sex and reproduction (though very useful in productive labour too). The nineteenth century called women simply 'the Sex' and every religious and later medical theory asserted women's primary function as wives, mothers and prostitutes, or in other words reproducers, raisers of children and providers of sex. The disenfranchised status of women, their status as chattel, the legal property of fathers, husbands or guardians, without political or legal rights of their own, was the material basis for this cultural understanding. What women thought, what women

wanted or felt, was neither here nor there. Culturally, politically and legally, women were objects rather than subjects.

The reduction of people to object status — be it women in patriarchy, or Black people in slavery — means their reduction to their materiality, their bodies. Their significance, their presence in the social world, is as bodies. As bodies, they can be objects of commerce, commodities and private property, and means of production and reproduction. Hence the political struggle of women — as of slaves — has been for their emancipation to human status, emancipation from their status as subjectless bodies to the status of political and legal subject. In cultural terms, this has also meant a struggle for public self-expression — the insertion of the voices of women, of Black people, of the dispossessed working classes — into a culture that so far had been the exclusive product of white, educated men. It is the very reason why cultural politics — the public expression of subjectivity on the part of oppressed groups — continues to play such a central role in their struggle for equality.

The culture of men, or rather white men — patriarchal culture as we know it — has in its obsessive dualism not only opposed mind to body and hierarchised mind over body, it has also attributed mind to males and body to females. Since women signified body, men (who were doing the signifying) meant mind, culture, reason. It is only very recently in the history of culture that men have apparently discovered their own bodies, and become unduly fascinated by them. After centuries of suppression, that is to say of relegating body exclusively to women, Blacks and animals, the body has made its triumphant entry into male intellectual culture, spearheaded, as is also known, by French intellectuals like Foucault, Lacan and the semiologists.

Seen from a cultural-historical perspective, this is no mean achievement, and as we know, it has been singularly fruitful. The intellectual pleasures of writing, of the visual arts, of cinema, or music, indeed of science and thought of every kind, are now being analysed as sensual and sexual pleasures, as expressions of a person who is not all mind. But while this discovery of the body may be exciting and new in the culture of educated white men, it turns into a massive irony when educated women try to appropriate it for women. For it is nothing new for *women* to return to the body — we never have got away from being identified with it.

We should therefore recognise men's newly found fascination with bodily pleasure for what it is: a delayed recognition of the mortal encasings of their own minds. As women, with a cultural history at the opposite end of their dualistic stick, we should have a very different perspective on this development. We may welcome men's recognition of their own corporeality, less as a discovery of their bodies than as one step towards a recognition of the fallaciousness of the mind-body opposition.

Our task, then, is to reflect on what the world will look like without it. How do we reconceptualise what has been conceived of as either body or mind, as not divisible in this manner? How much of our thinking, our values, not to speak of our symbolic systems, has been influenced by this conception? What is the significance, for instance, of the concept of 'pleasure' so central in contemporary thought? What sort of pleasure is it, and what is its function?

The academic debate on pornography may serve as an excellent test case for these questions, since in many ways it exemplifies the development I am describing. Pornography has been the site of male culture's repression of the body — its relegation to the very bottom of the cultural trash can — and hence is seen as what now most needs to be raised to the top, to where mankind's highest mental stirrings are going on. It is professors of the highest rank and renown who today are ploughing the field of academic pornographology, proving that we have overcome not just the mind-body split, but the split between high culture and low culture. But I shall skip the male professors, revealing as they may be, and concentrate on what female professors are doing in their wake.

The feminist campaign against pornography, as is well known, has met with strong opposition not only from men, pornographers, the publishing industry, the professionals of culture and lawyers, who all have an obvious stake in the issue, but also from women and specifically from academic feminists. This 'pro-pornography feminism' has based its argument squarely on pleasure. Not that pleasure even is the argument, rather it is the natural standard, the obvious criterion, the implicit norm on which the argument is built.

So it is noted by Marion Bower, for example, and apparently with surprise, that 'Pornography can also produce physical sensations of sexual arousal in women as well as men' (p 41). Research conducted among themselves as well as other women is presented as counter-evidence allegedly disproving the feminist case: a plethora of books and articles are devoted to proving that women, too, may enjoy watching and even producing pornography.

Yet we know that women may enjoy reading Milton or Melville, Shakespeare or Joyce, and that they even enjoy writing literature where the reader is also positioned as male. Toni Morrison notes in the preface to her book *Playing in the Dark*: 'For reasons that should not need explanation there, until very recently ... the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white' (p. xiv). This has not prevented Black readers from enjoying American fiction, or indeed, from being moved by it, as Morrison herself eloquently proves. Saying that the literary imagination has positioned the reader as white — just as the cultural imagination

in general positions the cultural subject as male — says nothing about what Black people or women may do. It is an argument not about individuals and their social identity but about the subjectivity of reading and viewing, and how that subjectivity is structured by fictions or images.

As feminists we started from the assumption that women as much as men are socialised by this culture — that women too have internalised sexism. As subjects of culture and education, we are all of us socialised to assume an androcentric, sexist, or as we may say metaphorically, a 'male' point of view, just as we are all socialised to a racist, eurocentric or 'white' point of view. But point of view, cultural subjectivity or literary perspective is not what pro-pornography feminists are interested in: their interest is in physical response, bodily arousal, the stirrings of physiology. Far from being an exploration of how the body is part of a person's whole person, indivisible from their subjectivity or mind, their argument turns into an exploration not only of the autonomy of the body, but its supremacy over the mind.

Although patriarchal culture has treated women as bodies, supposedly without a mind, it nevertheless has long applied itself to the surreptitious knowledge that women are persons endowed with subjectivity. Thus while straightforward, traditional sadism might be said to ignore the victim's feelings, it actually presupposes that the victim objects to her victimisation: it is the thrill of sadism to violate the victim's will.

Sadism is the genre that goes with the historical legal bondage of women, their outright subjection and disenfranchisement. But ours is the age of sado-masochism; for the advanced sadism of the modern age aims at the subordination not only of the victim's body, but also of her will, since women's will has now become of consequence. Women may publicly express themselves, give voice to what they think and feel and how they interpret what they experience. Hence the subordination of women's will can only be achieved through control over its expression — that is to say, if the sadist himself invents, dramatises and represents it.

Masochism is not, as is popularly thought, an attitude of the victim, it is the sadist's invention of an attitude *for* the victim. The age of sado-masochism puts all the importance on the alleged pleasure of the victim: her acceptance of the sadistic rule of force used against her, her supposed pleasure in it. Thus the distinctive feature of contemporary pornography is the lascivious smile on the represented woman's face, saying how she welcomes, how she likes and desires her sexual subordination and exploitation. Her body is now being mobilised against herself, against her will.

While this is nothing new in the realm of sado-masochism, indeed, nothing new in the experience of women, what is new is the concerted intellectual effort to declare

the body as the site of truth. Once the body has spoken, expressed its 'pleasure' as physiological reaction, we proceed to read this as the woman's will, her consent to the vexation which produced it.

Thus women's collective political objection to pornography as a practice in society dwindles to a lie, at best a self-deception, in the face of physiological response. Even where a woman may report having experienced a physiological reaction against her will — for example in being raped — a reaction which distresses and upsets her, all her expressions as a conscious thinking intelligent and political being are deemed irrelevant compared to what is defined as her — or her body's — 'pleasure'. The expression of the body, its apparently marvellous autonomy has become the ultimate truth, as if it had nothing to do with culture, as if it put the lie to the mind. In particular, it has become the locus where the true self resides.

Thus Carol Clover writes in her introduction to the anthology *Dirty Looks*:

There *is* something awesome about the way that pornography can move our bodies, even when we don't want it to and even if we don't approve of the images that make it happen. (p.3)

And she adds in parentheses: 'If the unconscious were a politically correct place, it would not need to be unconscious'. The unconscious apparently *is* the body, or the body its direct expression, which comes down to the same thing. There is no theory here about any interaction between consciousness and the unconscious, of any dialectic between the physical and the psychological: there is only a direct aim at the body, bypassing the mind. What a person may think on reflection, on political and intellectual grounds, concerning, for instance, pornography is of no consequence when their body speaks.

Academic feminists advocating pornography not only uphold the old dualistic positivism of a mind encased in a body, they also uphold all the other patriarchal dualisms — insisting on the dirtiness of sex and on the badness of 'girls' devoted to it. 'Bad girls' is what Loretta Loach calls the women she spoke to who enjoy pornography: 'they are the hidden participants in the porn controversy, the transgressors, the bad girls who refuse to be repressed by politics' (p.268). The only difference from the patriarchy of the nineteenth century is that today it counts as the height of radical chic to be 'bad' and to talk 'dirty'.

While this has the ring of adolescent rebellion against the stern moral authorities of parents and church fathers, it nevertheless has more serious political implications. For the body also plays a crucial role in the thinking of the new Right, especially their

theorising of ethnicity and culture as being inscribed in the body (not to mention their unregenerate theorising of sex as biological). Thus we may read in *The Republican*, the party organ of the German ultra-right Republicans:

The intuitive and emotional bond to one's own people, however, can develop only if we are born into that people, raised among that people, thus being able from the beginning to identify with it. In other words, if one has imbibed belonging to that people, as it were, with the mother's milk ... A Turk or a Nigerian does not simply become a German by being given a German passport. Because of the effectiveness of this inner bond he remains at heart what he always was: a Turk or a Nigerian. Only in exceptional cases may he detach himself — and even then only certain parts of his being — to become a German.

In other words, his body remains the true repository of his ethnicity, no matter what he does, learns, acquires in his life as a person. He may even get to know German culture better than a German who was raised in it, having consciously acquired and studied it — yet what is of interest and consequence is his 'being', that is, his body.

There is a concerted intellectual effort underway to locate the self back in the body as biological or bio-cultural fact. Everything else is but the superficial trimmings of a mind trying to disguise the truth of the body — an acquired foreign culture belying the truth of ethnicity, a conscious mind negating the body's truth. The purpose is to deal with bodies according to their nature, deporting them to where nature grew them, deploying them as nature designed them: Turks to Turkey, Nigerians to Nigeria, native women for the sexual purposes nature has so aptly equipped them for.

Primo Levi writes in *If This is a Man*, his account of being a prisoner in Auschwitz: 'there we learnt that our personality is fragile, that it is in much greater danger than our life.' We may learn to bear injuries to our bodies, but what is being done to us as persons — the violation of our person — is a peril different from the physical threat to kill our body. It is a danger which once again is being made invisible by a theory which insists on reducing the self to the body.

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