Cameron, Debbie, and Liz Frazer. "The Liberal Organ: Porn in The Guardian (1985)."
The Trouble & Strife Reader. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London:
Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 134–141. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-017>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023,
14:24 UTC.

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17. The Liberal Organ: Porn in The Guardian (1985)

Debbie Cameron & Liz Frazer

On May 20 1983, *The Guardian* carried a full-page advertisement for an exhibition by the photographer Helmut Newton. The image was a naked woman in bondage, while the caption wittily urged us to go and see the exhibition 'unless you're all tied up'. Women lost no time in complaining: several letters were printed during the following week deploring both the ad itself and the editorial policy that allowed it to appear. As it turned out, these letters were only the first of many. The correspondence raged until the end of July, covering every aspect of the debate on pornography. In all, 35 letters on the subject were published.

We collected these letters as a sort of political archive. Both of us were active in the feminist campaign against pornography and we had ourselves contributed to the *Guardian* discussion. As a result we were given more material in the form of private correspondence, including copies of an exchange between two men.

The contributions that came after the initial protest letters were overwhelmingly pro-porn; they were mostly from men, but a number of women also argued against the feminist position. Although this position was represented by several correspondents beside ourselves, it seemed to make very little impression on the course of the debate. So we were led to examine the whole question of why on this particular issue, ways of thinking are dominated by the 'liberal' tradition which *The Guardian* obviously represents.

Liberals are traditionally *less* our enemies than conservatives, because they are seen to preach the freedom of the individual, and this has for some time entailed a rejection of sexism. There is no justification for discriminating against particular individuals just because they are women. Liberals, in other words, support 'women's rights'. Many feminist issues are discussed within this framework of rights: abortion, for instance, where our slogan has long been 'a woman's right to choose'. It is no accident that liberal men have supported the demand for abortion as an individual right (which happens to be exercised by women), and equally it is no accident that they do not support our position on pornography. In the case of pornography they assert it is the right of the individual to use it in private. On the issue of pornography

a glaring contradiction appears between liberalism and feminism, where on other issues there need be no contradiction.

We want to examine the liberal arguments for the continued existence of pornography as revealed in the *Guardian* correspondence. What we aim to show is that these arguments are underlain by certain assumptions, hardly ever made explicit, about the nature of the individual. Furthermore, these assumptions are totally at odds with any *feminist* notion of the individual. Because of this, liberals are never the allies of feminism; because of this, we should stop demanding our 'rights' and replace the liberal concept of *right* with a much more straightforward insistence on *power*.

The correspondence

The first letters in the correspondence were from women, and expressed outrage: 'Even the tabloids ... stop short of ropes round her *neck*, for God's sake, and leather'. But when men entered the ring, a new note was struck, and the women were taken to task for what one writer called their 'prudish hysteria'. These cooler and more 'objective' correspondents introduced a number of points which were to recur throughout the debate.

One of these was the question of whether pornography directly causes assaults on women. Many writers denied that it did, and some asserted there would be more violence if porn were suppressed. This part of the debate illustrates the extent to which the feminist argument, that pornography *is* violence against women, simply is not understood; it also illustrates a liberal belief that private activities and attitudes are of no importance unless they can be shown to have measurable 'public' effects. We will return later on to this dichotomy between the public and the private.

Another recurrent concern was with *definition*. Men were worried about confusing pornography with 'erotica' or 'art'. Often, we felt this was just stone-walling. To avoid engaging with clear cases, anti-feminists challenged us to pronounce on the borderlines of offensiveness. But men were also worried about *who* defines an image as pornographic, and this concern shaded into a concern about authoritarianism: other people telling the individual what he (we use the masculine pronoun advisedly here) was permitted or forbidden to do. One correspondent remarked that feminists

are totally convinced that they know *better*. Whatever 'good' one seeks to do someone by deciding for them what they should be allowed to see does not diminish the odious arrogance of the attitude itself.

This arrogance became out and out authoritarianism when it was practised by the state through censorship. It was endlessly repeated that ‘what censorship means in effect is more state control over our lives and greater police powers’.

But while neither the state nor women in general were felt to have any right to dictate to men, men were felt to have every right to look at pornography: indeed this was labelled by one writer as one of ‘the basic rights of any free society’. Moreover, since pornography is entirely harmless, ‘What right does Ms Cameron have to deny [men] even their fantasies of non-violent contact with women?’ This defence of men’s fantasies often went hand in hand with the idea that some men actually needed to gratify them with pornography, either because they were abnormal, or because feminists so often denied men anything more concrete in the way of sex. But the central question here was whether anyone had the right to deny the individual his private pleasures; and the commonest answer was no, especially when this might mean state intervention.

Our initial reaction to the general position taken by correspondents was to find it inconsistent and contradictory. We felt inclined to argue against the proposition that using porn was harmless unless it inspired a man to go out and commit atrocities that minute; we also wanted to deny that porn fulfilled a ‘need’ for any man. As for ‘rights’, the answer was that women have a ‘right’ not to be degraded, which conflicts with men’s ‘right’ to use pornography. This line, which implies that the problem is fixing an acceptable balance of rights, was actually taken by two women correspondents. But on reflection we concluded it was not a very useful perspective. The apparent illogic of men’s concentration on their *rights* and their *needs*, as well as the apparent falseness of their claim that porn is harmless, fell into place when we realised what was beneath the surface of the discussion: a concept of the individual which is fundamental to liberalism, but alien to us. It is that concept of the individual, and its political implications, that really need to be attacked.

The liberal individual

Liberals believe in an individual who is autonomous and above all *presocial* rather than being shaped by society. Society is a coming together of various, already fully-formed persons, and the major political conflict that exists is between the single individual and the larger society which constantly threatens to overwhelm him. (Again, our choice of pronoun reflects our understanding of the liberal individual discussed in political theory as prototypically a male individual.) Individuals therefore need to be protected from *society*; they are not naturally *of* it. Liberty, in this framework, lies in separation from others, and especially, separation from the collectivity.

Liberal political theory states that an individual has certain natural rights which exist before and regardless of social arrangements: the right to life, the right to property (which is needed to maintain life) and the right to go about one's business unmolested. It is because in a presocial 'state of nature' these rights could not be guaranteed (people would always be molesting each other) that individuals actually come together to form societies (this is the idea of the 'social contract'). In doing so each concedes a certain amount of his autonomy to the state; in return, the state will protect individual rights. However, the power of the state must be kept to the minimum necessary for this protection: individuals must retain as far as possible their presocial freedom of action. This leads to the division between the public domain, where authority is vested in the state, and private life, where the state may not encroach on individual freedom. Private life for the liberal is sacrosanct.

Many of the reforms which constituted the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s were 'liberal' in this sense. For instance, the legalisation of male homosexuality between consenting adults was defended on the grounds that sex was a private matter and therefore something the state should not interfere with. Similarly with the relaxation of censorship (and the resultant increase in the availability and acceptability of pornography). Since porn was defined as sexual, it was outside the proper sphere of the state. This notion of an inviolable right to freedom in private clearly underlies the repeated equation of censorship and authoritarianism in the *Guardian* correspondence.

The concept of a public/private split also explains why so many correspondents could not see how the use of pornography could have harmful effects on other people. Since for the liberal, private life is outside society, the part of one's life on which society has no legitimate claim, it cannot possibly have social or political consequences.

Needs

Liberal theorists have traditionally argued that human individuals exist with certain needs (commonly mentioned ones include food, warmth, shelter and sex). Like the individuals themselves, these needs are presocial; they are not dictated or formed by society and its practices. This idea too has consequences for the debate on pornography. Since the need for sex simply and unproblematically exists for each individual prior to socialisation, the forms of sexual gratification that exist within a society are seen simply as responses to this pre-existing need. For the liberal, then, pornography testifies to men's need for the kinds of sex depicted in it, rather than appearing to mould sexual desire in a socially and politically loaded way.

The issue of need was made much more explicit in the *Guardian* correspondence than the concept of the individual and his rights. Some contributors pulled the strands together by insisting that the need for sexual gratification, though natural, should be confined to the private sphere:

As it happens, I object to having my natural drives stimulated when I'm crossing London on business by being confronted with ... bare buttocks and a pair of pouting glossy lips. It fucks up my day for me. That's alright in the bedroom, but when it's on the street ...

This man clearly felt that *public* pornography was the main bone of contention because it tended to cause unacceptable public behaviour toward women. In the bedroom, however, it would be his own business. He did not entertain the idea that feminists might be criticising his sexual desire *itself*, because to him sexual desire is both private and natural.

Others felt that while men needed sex, they did not (or should not) have a natural need for pornography. They turned to it only when other more acceptable forms of sexual gratification were denied them.

... the primary function of pornography is to satisfy the unhappy needs of personalities which, for whatever reasons, are inadequate to meet the tasks of normal social and sexual behaviour.

This is something of a contradiction in the liberal position, since it seems either to assert that there is *not* an unproblematically given, presocial sexuality, or else that there are 'unhappy' or 'inadequate' persons who are not free to choose their mode of behaviour.

Elsewhere, however, the freedom of individuals to act as they wish is taken for granted, and this leads to the absurd claim that women are equal partners in the pornographic enterprise because they 'choose' to model for pornographers. The physical, mental and financial pressure that drives women into the sex industry is ignored, for the liberal insists we are all free and equal.

In a similar vein, women are said to have equal needs for and power over sexual intercourse, which they display in pornography. 'Hard-core porn portrays the woman as the active partner', as one man said. Another noted that men fantasise about being dominated by women, and concludes porn is about 'man's inhumanity to man' (*sic!*) Liberals do not appear to see the power structure in which the

customer is always superior to the goods. Even if women spent their whole sexual lives dominating men, it would still be men's fantasies that were being gratified by women, so that the women would not in fact wield power.

It is time to look more critically at this liberal perspective on pornography, and to point out the implications of rejecting it, as we believe feminists must.

Radical feminism and the individual

Feminism derives from certain insights about the world and about women's position within it. Three of these are especially relevant, since they are completely incompatible with the assumptions of liberalism.

1. *The individual is a social being.* Feminists have always rejected the notion that male dominance is a natural state of affairs, arguing instead that women and men are socialised or conditioned into different roles, which social practices and institutions coerce them into playing. We are the products of our relations with others in a given social and political system: there is no such thing as a 'state of nature' and there are no such things as needs, desires or 'rights' existing independently of the conditions in which we live.
2. *The social world is one of power inequalities.* Feminists take it for granted that the world which produces us is not one in which we are all equal. Men have power over women; men control the social institutions and through them, our potentialities as human beings. Thus it is nonsense to say, as liberals do, that women are free and equal individuals. None of us acts autonomously, since we are products of a particular social structure; but women have much less autonomy than men.
3. *The personal is political.* There is no sphere where social conditions and power structures are absent or irrelevant. Power relations are played out every day in our interactions with others: for women, the conflicts may be most obvious, and the oppression most acute, in the so-called 'private' space of family or sexual relationships. Thus feminists refuse to depoliticise sex, love and similar 'private' concerns: they reject altogether the liberal idea of an inviolable private life.

If women are social beings whose lives are permeated with conflict and inequality, it is ultimately no good demanding our 'rights' as individuals. The whole idea of individual rights implicitly rests on a belief that individuals are *equal*, and this is patently untrue.

One of the *Guardian* letters, written by a woman, put the point very clearly:

Unfortunately it is easy to assert a right to this or that but difficult to resolve the conflicts which may then arise. My neighbour may feel he has a right to play his records at top volume while I feel I have a right to peace.

The liberal notion of 'justice' assumes that such conflicts can somehow be resolved by the mediation of impartial judges. But once we realise that the judges themselves are products (and if they are men, most likely defenders) of the prevailing order—in other words that the dice are loaded — it becomes evident that *power* is the real deciding factor.

The same letter goes on to challenge the male defenders of porn:

... suppose they heard that in some neighbouring country a large proportion of the women derived pleasure from seeing men raped, humiliated, tortured or killed and furthermore that the women of that country were ... generally stronger than men, ie perfectly able to mete out such treatment, would they have any misgivings about visiting that country? Unfortunately with the reverse situation women do not have that choice. We are residents.

From this perspective, abstract talk of individuals and their rights is a red herring. What is really at stake is the collective power of opposing social groups: in this case, men and women.

We have sometimes been uneasy about a tendency in feminism toward a sort of libertarianism or anarchy which stresses the political pre-eminence of the individual. This emphasis on 'my needs' and 'my rights' is a double-edged sword, for it ignores the fact that needs and rights, indeed individuals themselves, do not arise in a social vacuum. We have a responsibility to question what we think we 'need' or are 'entitled to'. We must also recognise that rights cannot be demanded in a vacuum. Feminists are really aiming not for the recognition of each individual woman's right but for the advancement of women as a class; which means, in effect, the overthrow of male power.

Power not rights

Feminists must struggle for power rather than rights, and this struggle will be more effective if we are clear that we are struggling not only against the male monopoly on power, but also against the liberal ideology of the free individual and his rights, which conceals his power. We should set the terms of the debate, and make it clear that liberal democracy and feminist democracy are not the same thing.