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Author(s): Lynn S. Chancer

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From Pornography to Sadomasochism: Reconciling Feminist Differences

By LYNN S. CHANCER

ABSTRACT: Stemming from a belief in the deeply interconnected character of private and public events, sexuality was a key part of second-wave feminist thought in the 1960s and 1970s. In turn, feminism influenced academic interest in sexuality throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, the sex debates, or sex wars, of the later decades have resulted in a recurrent division between feminists. Some have emphasized the structural character of sexist subordination; others have paid relatively greater attention to individual experiences of sexual repression. This split between sexism and sex manifested itself in polarized feminist positions over a variety of issues. This article focuses specific attention on feminist divisions over pornography and sadomasochism, and it suggests synthetic positions beyond either-or divides. Suggestions are made for a third wave of feminism that avoids divisive pitfalls and includes considerations of both differences and commonalities between women.

Lynn S. Chancer is associate professor of sociology at Fordham University. She is the author of Sadomasochism in Everyday Life (1992); Reconcilable Differences: Confronting Beauty, Pornography and the Future of Feminism (1998); and Provoking Assaults: When High Profile Crimes Become Divisive Social Causes (forthcoming). She has written numerous articles and book chapters about gender and crime, feminist theory, and American culture.

THE second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s played an important part in the growth of sexuality as an influential topic of women's studies and social science research by the year 2000. After the publication of radical feminist works like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* (1970), investigating sexuality and studying power became intimately connected. No longer was sex seen as a merely private matter, somehow immune from public critiques of dominance and subordination to which issues such as the economy, or racism, had often been subjected. Rather, breaking down conventional barriers between power exerted publicly and privately, politically and personally, became key to defining gender studies. In the wake of early feminism, it was now legitimate to explore problems of sexual oppression and sexual repression that had historically plagued women and that had negative consequences for men as well.

But by the 1980s and 1990s, other developments also tied the feminist movement to the study of sexuality. Broadly speaking, no longer was there any illusion that feminists spoke in a single voice; substantive differences were even more blatantly visible than common concerns. One well-known manifestation of conflict was over second-wave presumptions that all women were equal. By the 1980s and 1990s, feminism had spawned a range of feminisms that quite properly called attention to racial, class, and sexual divergences in women's experiences and perspectives. Regarding sexuality in

particular, though, feminists started to disagree across these social differences about where emphasis should be placed: relatively speaking, should sexual oppression or sexual repression be given more attention?

This dispute took the form of a series of so-called sex debates, or sex wars, which have become familiar in the last two decades not only to feminist activists but also to feminist researchers interested in the subject of sex. In and of themselves, these sex debates might be viewed as harmless, indeed as testimony to feminism(s)'s strength as a growing and increasingly diverse U.S. social movement. Yet arguments between feminists over sexuality have unfolded in a striking pattern. This article contends that the divisions have unfolded repetitively insofar as some feminists have consistently focused on the problem of sexist oppression, while others have emphasized sexual repression. Moreover, it is my intention to show that this recurrent divide has unintentionally weakened the movement from within during the same period when conservative reactions were feeding a "backlash" from without (see Faludi 1991).

But what exactly was this split between sex and sexism, as I call it (Chancer 1998), that evolved from common concerns about "sexual politics" into a recurrent manifestation of difference? On the side of the debate highlighting sexism, some feminists focused on the oppressive character of patriarchal societies writ large. Here, women protested institutional inequities of power—in the law or at workplaces—where

gendered discrimination takes place. Other feminists accorded relatively greater priority to achieving sexual freedom for women, recognizing that male-dominated societies often restrict women's desires as a fundamental form of control (elevating heterosexuality, for instance, to a privileged status). Highlighting sex on this side, individual defiance was valued just as much as critiques of institutions; sexual practices that challenge traditional constraint became a mode of rebellion and a personal politic.

This split can be traced back through at least five issues where it recurred in a similar form, even as its contents shifted, through the 1980s and 1990s. First, and perhaps most well known, the issue of pornography became bitterly divisive. Going back even further, to the 1970s, some feminists favored censoring sexually explicit materials that they believed oppressed women vis-à-vis particularly sadistic representations of violence. In particular, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin proposed an ordinance that, if enacted, would have outlawed the subset of these pornographic images that was perceived to be most objectionable. Other feminists, among them Ellen Willis and Carol Vance, were opposed to legally mandating restrictions; on the contrary, they argued, some women experienced pornography as sexually liberating. Though neither side entirely disagreed with the other—more precisely, their disagreements were about emphasis—the former position highlighted systemic patriarchal ills bequeathed from the past. In

contrast, feminists holding the latter position stressed a need for sexual freedom in the present.

A second example of a feminist split between sexism and sex manifested itself at the now-notorious 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality. This conference made clear that some feminists regarded sadomasochistic sexual practices as inseparable from patriarchal hierarchies based on relations of dominance and subordination (for example, Linden 1982). This view diverged from other feminists' view that sadomasochistic practices constituted a legitimate form of consensual sexual activity that women were entitled to enjoy without fear of discriminatory judgment by society or other feminists. Yet a third instance of the division between sexism and sex involved polarized feminist interpretations of sex work. For some feminists, including Laurie Schrage (1989), prostitution was inseparable from the systematic exploitation of women (see also Barry 1979; Hoigard and Finstad 1992); for others, including many sex workers themselves, women's involvement was felt to be legitimate and to offer greater excitement and enjoyment than many other occupations (for example, Bell 1987; Delacoste and Alexander 1987). Linked to the former position was a commitment to maintaining prostitution's criminalized status; on the other hand, those who believed in sex work's legitimacy sought to decriminalize the conditions under which they believed women had a right to labor freely and safely.

A fourth division has centered on the issue of violence against women.

Representative of the sexual-subordination side in this case was the stance of well-known feminist author Susan Brownmiller. In *Against Our Will* (1975), Brownmiller argued that sexual assault was inseparable from the oppressive character of male domination in general; even if a particular woman had not experienced rape, fear of violence exerted intimidating controls over her own and the lives of all women. Later however, in *The Morning After* (1993), Katie Roiphe contended that radical feminists had exaggerated the existence and dangers of violence against women. For Roiphe, placing herself provocatively in opposition, this perspective overlooked various situations in which apparently objectionable heterosexual interactions were experienced as involving erotic ambiguity and play. Relatedly, and published that same year, Naomi Wolf's *Fire with Fire* (1993) pitted the idea of "power feminism" against a "victim feminism," which she, too, claimed had become an outdated by-product of older feminist approaches to problems of dominance and subordination.

Last and most recent is a similarly shaped feminist division between sexism and sex over the subject of beauty. Ironically, Wolf's better-known earlier book *Beauty Myth* (1991) offered a classic contemporary statement of the sexist subordination position. The author objected to the debilitating character of patriarchal expectations that women look eternally young, thin, and attractive. But this view, too, came to be the subject of feminist controversy through the 1990s as some women,

approximating the sex side of the debate, expressed the belief that beauty could be a source of pleasure as well as pain. Exemplifying this most recent schism, Kathy Davis has described being attacked by Kathryn Morgan over the issue of cosmetic surgery: in *Reshaping the Female Body* (1995), Davis documented many women's feelings that such surgery was desired and was experienced to be "empowering." For Morgan, however, women's belief that they needed cosmetic surgery could not be separated from subordination to patriarchal expectations of beauty, which were badly in need of change (Morgan 1991).

If this split between sexism and sex has recurred in feminist debates over one issue after another—pornography, sadomasochism, prostitution, violence against women, and, most currently, beauty—why has this been the case? Before addressing this question, an ensuing section elaborates on the sexism-sex divide as it unfolded around two of the aforementioned issues: pornography and sadomasochism. This section suggests that more synthetic third positions are both possible and needed if feminists are not to become distracted from making agreed-upon external changes by spending energy attacking each other's divergent views. The rigid character of these ongoing divisions makes it difficult to discern commonalities as well as differences between feminists, and it has led to the paying of greater attention to the political weaknesses of this incipient social movement than to its strengths. After this brief discussion of divided feminist views

concerning pornography and sadomasochism, a final section reviews three factors that may have produced the recurrent divide between sex and sexism. Here, in conclusion, I suggest how further incarnations of the split might be avoided in a feminist third wave of the future.

THE PORNOGRAPHY
ISSUE: THESIS, ANTITHESIS,
POSSIBLE SYNTHESIS?

In 1988, I was reminded of the extent of acrimony between feminists over this issue after attending a New York City conference entitled "Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Radical Feminism." Not only were radical feminists discussing attacks against their own position, but speakers were attacking sexual liberals as well. Indeed, pro-censorship feminist speakers on what I am calling the sexual-subordination side denounced feminists on the sexual-pleasure side for failing to join a campaign against pornography. Women who defended pornography's legality were portrayed as traitorous; specifically, Catharine MacKinnon referred to Willis and others as the "Uncle Toms of the movement" (Chancer 1988).

Yet the position represented by MacKinnon and Dworkin itself failed to address three substantive points being made by feminists with whom they disagreed. First, a problem raised on the sex side by the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force was that MacKinnon and Dworkin's position potentially abridged civil liberties: anti-pornography ordinances introduced in the cities of Minneapolis and

Indianapolis posed dangers to First Amendment freedoms by using vague criteria to outlaw particular images; for this reason, the two ordinances were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court. However, after the Canadian Supreme Court kept the issue alive by ruling that the ordinances were constitutional at least north of the United States, a book written by Dworkin herself was seized on the U.S.-Canada border (Chancer 1998).

Second, as Willis and Vance, among other members of the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force, pointed out, an anti-pornography position was likely to be experienced by many women as in favor of sexual repression. According to this argument, some pornographic images are experienced as liberating in their effects, especially when expression of any sexual feelings has often been historically tabooed based on gender. Of concern, then, was whether the sexual-subordination side paradoxically threatened to remove what was for some women a valued medium of experienced pleasures. Finally, a third objection raised by Willis and others revolved around a danger not only to individual women but to feminism as a social movement: was it a problem to focus so much attention on a single issue? In and of itself, little reason existed to expect that censoring pornography would transform male-dominated relations of power that are multifaceted and complex in their origins and effects.

Although those wishing to legally restrict pornography had little response to these objections (rather, they seemed to malign the feminists

who raised them), it also makes little sense to overlook valid points made on the anti-pornography side of this debate. Two things can be possible simultaneously. As students of representation have underscored, cultural imagery can both circulate consensually and lawfully—in the process allowing quite genuine feelings of pleasure to be experienced—all the while such images nevertheless contribute to the reproduction of dominant-subordinate relationships in an inequitably organized society. In this regard, one might refer to the persistence of what could be deemed a “hegemonic pornography.” By this, I mean that as long as a given society remains largely politically, economically, and culturally male-dominated, certain sexual representations are likely to become ideologically predominant—or “hegemonic”—over others. Accordingly, many of the cultural images and narratives present in contemporary pornography are likely to represent male desires and fantasies disproportionately. Thus even though Willis, Vance, and others suggest that some women experience pleasure by viewing or participating in the making of pornography, other women are likely to feel alienated by the hegemonic pornography they encounter in movies, magazines, or books. Within much contemporary pornography, they may have good reason to feel that their own sexual needs, feelings, and desires do not find authentic self-reflection.

Consequently, a problem with the pornography debate as it has divided feminists since the 1970s is that it has not left adequate room for combining valid points from each of these

two sides. Ironically, even though feminist theory has been distinctive in advocating the advantages of both-and positions, the pornography debate has tended to be waged in either-or form. Yet perhaps less divisive positions are possible and could emerge from synthesizing excessively polarized sets of considerations. On the one hand, it makes little sense to censor pornography, thereby removing a source of pleasure from some women and contributing to the diminution of important First Amendment freedoms for both sexes. Moreover, granting pornography too much attention can indeed be deradicalizing in effect, distracting attention from wide-ranging and multi-issued perspectives that fueled feminism’s vibrancy in prior periods.

On the other hand, nothing about an anti-censorship position prevents protesting the following problem: even if pornography were not restricted by law, women do not equally occupy positions of ownership and authorship when it comes to representations of their sexuality. Consequently, just as it makes little sense to censor some pornography, it is likewise unnecessary to abandon efforts aimed at transforming the institutional contexts within which the pornography industry has thrived. For instance, critiques of sexual socialization within traditional nuclear families relate secondarily, but significantly, to altering pornography—namely, how and where sexual desires are channeled—in a broader sense. Similarly germane is how women make decisions to work in the sex industry at all or why men are still largely in control of pornog-

raphy's profits and production. In other words, questions of gender and class interaction need not be left far away but can be melded into a reconsidered third feminist position on pornography. But a similar analysis may also assist in clarifying feminist divides over the issue of sadomasochism.

SADOMASOCHISM, FEMINISM, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Reflecting the academic tinge of these debates even as they seeped into popular cultural cognizance, a feminist split over the issue of sadomasochism first became controversial in a conference setting. In 1982, the Barnard Conference on Sexuality was the site of a controversy over sex versus sexism as to whether women from a pro-sadomasochism West Coast group (SAMOIS) ought legitimately be included on a conference panel. According to the organizers, feminists in SAMOIS had a right to participate in sadomasochistic sex; it was a form of consensual sexual pleasure, they argued. An even more central issue was entailed for many women who thereby found themselves on the sex side of this next schism: had feminists concerned with sexual subordination, like MacKinnon and Dworkin, become too rigid, allowing a brand of political correctness to become predominant and limiting? To the extent that this had occurred, a feminist superego may have started to intimidate women whose experiences of sexuality did not conform to a sanitized and idealized vision. Women might begin to fear acknowledging pleasure they

found in heterosexuality, pornography, or sadomasochistically oriented sexual practices—whether politically correct or not. Thus, these feminists contended that by repressing the verity of many women's psychic and sexual realities, feminism risked reproducing another version of sexual repression—paradoxically, since this was a central component of the oppression against which feminists initially rebelled.

But, as with the pornography issue, the validity of these objections did not necessitate eschewing any and all sensible points on the other side of this debate. Rather, two inter-related arguments, neither of which was adequately addressed this time through the sexual-pleasure position, need to be blended into any satisfactory third-wave synthesis. First, it should be noted that the sex side of this feminist debate made only narrow usage of the term "sadomasochism": in and outside the Barnard conference, the concept was associated almost exclusively with sexuality. While this was the connotation originally intended by Freud, other intellectual traditions have linked sadomasochism to a much wider array of social interactions involving dominance and subordination; these encompass, but are not limited to, the sexual. For example, in attempting to link psychoanalytic and Marxist thought, Frankfurt School theorist Erich Fromm (1941) and feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin (1988) both employed "sadomasochism" to refer to broad-based desires for controlling or being controlled. For Fromm, systems of power that have authoritarian psychosocial bases—

including, in quite different ways, capitalism and fascism—rely on sadomasochistic defense mechanisms for their sustenance. For Benjamin, sadomasochistic interactions often characterize familiar relationships between spouses, or between parents and child, which need not be overtly sexual in character.

Applying this point to the feminist debate over sadomasochism, then, raises a second problem, which those on the sex side of this debate tended to overlook. In contrast to the sexual-pleasure side's usage of the term to describe consensual relationships, sadomasochistic dynamics are often coercive. For instance, the situation of a battered woman—often unable to escape due to financial and psychic constraints and fearing the sadistic other with whom she has been involved—diverges dramatically from that of a woman in a sadomasochistic sexual situation. Only the latter can presumably halt sadomasochistic activity when and if she chooses. Moreover, it is not only within violent gendered relationships that lack of choice distinguishes what I have elsewhere called coercively "sadomasochistic dynamics" (Chancer 1992): far more broadly, women living in patriarchal societies often find themselves situated masochistically in a host of day-to-day situations not of their own making. So-called normal processes of gender socialization have traditionally placed women in a predicament Simone de Beauvoir ([1952] 1974) dubbed that of "the second sex"; in this sense, the conventionally (mis)used idea of masochism in

women has little to do with seeking pleasure in pain and much to do with the socially constructed ramifications of sexist subordination.

Therefore, it seems again that a third position is required that would be capable of incorporating two perspectives at once. In this second example, a more synthetic approach would neither repressively judge women who enjoy sadomasochistic sex consensually explored in the present nor ignore the seriousness of coercive social situations bequeathed to women (and men) from the past. On the one hand, it is problematic to ignore that in many sexual situations, playfulness indeed may be involved; on the other hand, to fail to indict institutional arrangements that make sadomasochistic dynamics common, in and beyond their sexual manifestations, is to let society off the hook. Hardly does the feminist movement gain from overlooking how "sadomasochistic dynamics" (Chancer 1992) characterize a variety of compulsively generated social situations. In addition to gendered interactions that may or may not involve violence, workplace interactions too often feature a sadomasochistic texture: especially in capitalistic contexts, fears about the punitive consequences of questioning or challenging a job may maintain hierarchical relations that have little to do with choice. Moreover, as is analogous with the previously cited example of domestic violence, sexual harassment poses a problem for feminists precisely because it often entails coercive dynamics of both gender and class. Like a particular batterer, many harassers may know

only too well that power in a given situation stems from an employee's economic need, not only from her sex.

But, with this, one comes back to the question of why feminists across a range of issues, including pornography and sadomasochism, have not insisted on more synthetic and less divisive approaches. It is inadequate simply to state the importance of doing two things at once: namely, both promoting sexual freedom and transforming ideas and institutions that limit choices outside and inside the bedroom. Thus, remaining to be investigated is why the split between sexism and sex developed in the first place and what this analysis suggests could help to avert its patterned recurrence.

TOWARD A THIRD WAVE OF FEMINISM: IN CONCLUSION

Three reasons can be cited that, in combination, have contributed to a repetitive splitting of sexism and sex in feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s. A first factor has already been mentioned: as Susan Faludi (1991) suggested, a conservative backlash against feminism through these decades may have generated defense reactions; overwhelmed by external obstacles, political activists may have unwittingly turned against one another. To the extent that such internalization has occurred, second-wave American feminism is by no means alone. Other social movements, too, including a 1960s anti-racist movement that became divided into civil rights and nationalistic segments and a character-

istically factionalized U.S. Left, have experienced acrimonious divisions. These may likewise stem from difficulties in effecting deep-seated changes in American society without encountering severe backlashes orchestrated in reaction.

A second explanation relates to cultural characteristics of the press. As Todd Gitlin (1980) and Stuart Hall et al. (1978), among other students of media, have noted, editors and reporters are attracted to sharply antagonistic oppositions between issues and spokespersons. Not only are such either-or polarities believed to sell news but presenting only two sides of a story serves an ideological function by appearing democratic; nevertheless, these authors argue, such disputes tend to neutralize the critical effects of points made by each opposing party. Applied to feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s, this suggests that perhaps the media have publicized only antagonistic two-sided positions—for instance, MacKinnon and Dworkin versus Willis and Vance on the pornography issue—even though a wider range of ideas actually characterizes feminist thought in concrete instances.

But while these first two external factors help to elucidate the question of feminist splitting in the 1980s and 1990s, a third explanation may have the most potential for altering feminist reactions from within. Even though editors and reporters favor two-sided antagonisms, attending feminist conferences and reading feminist writings about each of the five issues mentioned here—

pornography, sadomasochism, prostitution, violence against women, and beauty—make clear that the sex wars have not simply been a product of journalists' imaginations. Thus in the thick of political practice, it may be quite difficult for even feminists to enact theoretical commitments to both-and rather than either-or visions of the social world. Widespread dualisms—mind versus body; culture versus nature; masculinity versus femininity—are far more deeply embedded and familiar ways of thinking and feeling.

Even granting this trio of difficulties, though, both-and perspectives that respect rather than demean the various sides of debated issues are a crucial part of third-wave feminist approaches. To avoid the fractious divisions that have weakened the movement from within during several decades of conservative reaction, any revitalized movement has to incorporate several sets of considerations simultaneously into its activities as well as its theories. Happily, exactly such synthetic approaches have appeared in literatures concerning a number of the debates this article reviewed. For example, both-and approaches to the sex debates have characterized the work of Susan Bordo (1993) on the subject of sexist expectations of women's appearance and the work of Wendy Chapkis (1997) with regard to false splits between feminists over attitudes toward sex work (and sex workers).

Overall, then, the next wave of feminism stands to gain from incor-

porating both a capacity for respecting diversities of agency and an ability to make collective demands; both considerations of differences and commonalities are worth remembering and encompassing. More specifically, by "diversities of agency," I mean that it is counterproductive for feminists to divide over whether an individual woman likes and is aroused by pornography or not; enjoys sadomasochistic sexual practices or not; decides to undertake cosmetic surgery or not; wishes to engage in sex work or not.

These decisions may reflect valid differences of opinion between women who otherwise share similar overall goals. For example, what individuals like or do not like sexually about pornography, for instance, need not deflect attention from targeting sexism in the pornography industry overall. Collective demands can be made, challenging institutionally based power and raising questions of political economy; at the same time, valid differences between women are left to stand. Analogously, individuals' attitudes and actions regarding cosmetic surgery need not obscure another collective concern: transforming a media industry that still overvalues young, thin, and often white women's bodies. Nor do disagreements about an individual woman's engagement with sex work need to deflect feminist attentions away from the larger social context in which that woman often does not experience genuine economic choice. Finally, a two-pronged feminist strategy toward a third wave might

be able to protest the sadomasochistic character of a given culture, at the same time recognizing that sadomasochistic desires are likely to characterize many individuals' experiences of desire.

Across differences of class and race and sexual preference, feminists share interests in both criticizing systemic subordination and respecting individual diversities. Perhaps greater awareness of false dichotomies that have divided feminists in the recent past—such as the one analyzed here between sexism and sex—will ensure the realization of increasingly multifaceted goals in a not-too-distant feminist future.

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