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Men and Pornography: Illusions, Delusions, and the Struggle for Intimacy in Patriarchy

Hombres y pornografía: ilusiones, delirios y la lucha por la intimidad en el patriarcado

Robert Jensen

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ABSTRACT

The radical feminist critique of pornography remains the most compelling analysis of sexually explicit material available, yet it is routinely marginalized in the dominant culture and in feminist circles. Why? Patriarchy is woven deeply into our lives, and denial or avoidance of the pathology of patriarchy is common. But men should embrace, not reject, radical feminism, not only for the sake of women's liberation but for our own. The power of arguments from both justice and self-interest are particularly useful in helping men to understand and accept the radical feminist critique of pornography.

Keywords: *pornography, radical feminist, patriarchy*

RESUMEN

La crítica que el feminismo radical hace de la pornografía sigue siendo el análisis más convincente de los contenidos sexualmente explícitos, sin embargo, se continúa marginando en la cultura dominante y en los círculos feministas. ¿Por qué? El patriarcado está profundamente arraigado en nuestras vidas, y es común negar, o evitar, la patología del patriarcado. Pero los hombres deberían abrazar, no rechazar, el feminismo radical, no solo por el bien de la liberación de las mujeres sino también por la propia. El poder de los argumentos tanto de la justicia como del propio interés, son particularmente útiles para ayudar a los hombres a comprender y aceptar la crítica que realizar el feminismo radical de la pornografía.

Palabras clave: *pornografía, feminismo radical, patriarcado*

Robert Jensen is an emeritus professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin and a founding board member of the Third Coast Activist Resource Center. Contact: robertwilliamjensen@gmail.com

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RESUMO

A crítica que o feminismo radical fai da pornografía segue sendo a análise máis convincente dos contidos sexualmente explícitos, porén, continúase marxinando na cultura dominante e nos círculos feministas. Por que? O patriarcado está profundamente arraigado nas nosas vidas e é común negar ou evitar a patoloxía do patriarcado. Pero os homes deberían abrazar, non rexeitar, o feminismo radical, non só polo ben da liberación das mulleres senón tamén pola propia. O poder dos argumentos tanto da xustiza como do interese propio son particularmente útiles para axudar os homes a comprenderen e aceptaren a crítica do feminismo radical á pornografía.

Palabras chave: *pornografía, feminismo radical, patriarcado*

In the more than three decades that I have been advocating the radical feminist critique of pornography, the most common question I have heard from women is, "Why do men like pornography so much?"

Not all men use pornography, of course, and some women use it as well. But the pornography industry knows that the vast majority of its customers are men, and hence the majority of pornography reflects what pornographers believe men will watch—and come back to watch again—which helps shape contemporary sexual imaginations. Many women find this pornography, and men's use of it, to be distressing. They want to know why men—including the men in their lives, particularly male partners, and male children—find pornography so enticing, use it so routinely, and reject requests to stop.

The simple answer is, "Because pornography works." That is, graphic sexually explicit images spark intense sexual arousal that facilitates masturbation. Said bluntly: Pornography produces orgasms, reliably and efficiently.

"Yes, but there's no intimacy in that kind of sexual experience," women point out. "Exactly," I respond. "Pornography offers men sexual pleasure, with what feels like total control over oneself and women. Pornography offers men a quintessential sexual experience in patriarchy—pleasure without vulnerability."

But appearances are deceiving; that sense of control, over self and others, is both illusion and delusion. Men would benefit from understanding this. I certainly have benefitted, and that understanding came through radical feminism.

By taking seriously this critical perspective on pornography, I learned one of the most important lessons of my life: Radical feminism is not a threat but rather a gift to men (Jensen, 2019a, 2019b). When I encountered the radical feminist critique of pornography, it struck me as the most compelling analysis of sexually explicit material available, which is just as true today and is more needed today than ever. In this essay I defend these claims by drawing on not only the available evidence, but also my own experience. First, a bit of history.

In 1979, during what is generally referred to in the United States as the second wave of feminism, Andrea Dworkin published Pornography: Men Possessing Women, her landmark book analyzing the patriarchal underpinnings of the rapidly expanding pornography industry. That same year, Women Against Pornography marched on Times Square in New York City to protest the dominant culture's embrace of pornography under the cover of a so-called ethic of sexual liberation. The emerging radical feminist anti-pornography movement demanded accountability from both the pornographers and the mostly male pornography consumers and challenged the left/liberal ideology that tried to rationalize the exploitation.

This libertarian ideology used to defend pornography made simple claims that were especially attractive to male consumers: Sex is a natural part of human life, and pornography is just pictures of the variations of normal human sex, produced for consenting adults who should have the freedom to view if they choose. The libertarians' response to the feminist challenge, in short: Don't be a prude—there's nothing to worry about.

The movement's response, articulated so powerfully by Dworkin (1979, 1988), in short: Pornography is not "just sex" but a vehicle for eroticizing the domination/subordination dynamic that is central to patriarchy, a system of institutionalized male dominance (Jensen, 2007). Pornography is male dominance sexualized through modern communication technologies. Pornography does not free our sexual imaginations but keeps us trapped within the patriarchal project of protecting male power. A feminist critique of pornography is not conservative moralizing but rather an analysis of the harms to women—those used in pornography, those hurt by men using pornography, and all women living in a society in which their subordination is made into sexual entertainment (MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997).

The radical feminist anti-pornography movement's challenge to male dominance was the subject of intense debate in the late 1970s and '80s, in the United States and around the world. But the pornography industry and the sexual liberal

ideology (Leidholdt & Raymond, 1990)—espoused not only by men but also by some in the women's movement (McElroy, 1995; Strossen, 2000)—has prevailed. The world has grown steadily more pornographic—more images, more intensely eroticizing the domination/subordination dynamic, more widely accepted in the dominant culture than ever.

Take a minute to consider the curious nature of that victory—a pornography industry that grows ever more ruthless in its exploitation of women also becomes more normalized. And at the same time, the critique that offers the most compelling way to understand the industry is increasingly marginalized. Why? A simple explanation: Patriarchy is woven so deeply into the fabric of our lives that many people cannot see its effects, and many others choose to turn away rather than face the pathology of patriarchy, which is on full display in contemporary pornography.

The pornography that Dworkin analyzed for her groundbreaking book was, by today's standards, relatively tame. The amount of graphic sexually explicit material had increased steadily after Playboy published its first issue in 1953, but when the feminist anti-pornography movement was first organizing, home video was in its infancy and an early version of the internet was being used almost exclusively by government officials, scientists, and academics for communication and research. Pornographers of the 1970s pushed the boundaries of acceptability in magazines and films, but carefully. Then came home video and the new genre of "gonzo" pornography, which pushed those limits more aggressively. Then came the internet, where it seems there no limits on sexualized dominance remain.

Today, not only in the United States but anywhere in the world where people are online, culture is pornography saturated. Pornography is more easily accessible than ever to any child with a keyboard as well as to adults. The content of mainstream pornography has become steadily more overtly cruel and degrading to women, and more overtly racist (Jensen, 2007). Images of men's sexual exploitation of women are routine, and images of sexual violence (real or simulated) are so common that they pass without comment. Aggressive sex,

carried out against a background of misogynist slurs against the women, is routine. Scenes of women being aggressively penetrated (orally, vaginally, and anally) by multiple men at one time are routine. Oral sex designed to make women gag is routine. My longtime friend and co-author Gail Dines (2010) sums it up best with the term "body-punishing sex," the bread and butter of the pornography industry.

Child pornography—sexually explicit material made using minors, what is now increasingly called "child sexual abuse material" to make it clear that it is a record of an assault—remains clearly illegal everywhere in the United States, and the profit-driven pornography industry generally steers clear of those risks. Instead, they produce pornography using young-looking adult women presented in youthful outfits set in activities such as babysitting, what Dines calls "pseudo-child pornography."

Every form of hierarchy is sexualized in pornography. The racism in pornography is overt, drawing on crude racial stereotypes about both men and women of color, larded with racial slurs that have long been rejected in public discourse and polite company (Fritz, Malic, Paul, & Zhou, 2020; West, 2020). The industry offers images of black and brown men who are naturally sexually violent, nasty black women, hot-blooded Latinas, demure Asian geishas—every racist fantasy imaginable in white-supremacist societies such as the United States can be found in pornography.

If pornographers have a "creative" problem today, it's that they have run out of ways to intensify the sexual charge of male dominance without risking criminal penalties. One pornography producer told me in the early 2000s that he had no idea what new trends in the content of pornography might be coming, because he couldn't imagine anything more extreme than the existing pornographic sexual practices. "I've filmed everything that I know how to do to a woman's body," he said, with a shrug.

Some caveats: This brief account identifies patterns in pornography. Given the millions of pornographic films and images in the world, of course there is

considerable variation. One can find pornography with different themes, some produced by people who identify as feminist and egalitarian. Some pornography targets female viewers. There is a considerable amount of pornography produced for gay men, and a lesser amount for lesbians. The pornographic world, like the world in general, is diverse. But within that diversity are patterns, and the patterns in pornography are clear: The bulk of the market focuses on heterosexual sex for predominantly male viewers, and much of that sexualizes domination and subordination.

Nearly five decades after radical feminists first highlighted the misogyny and racism in pornography—misogyny and racism that has now intensified beyond what anyone could have imagined in those early years—one might expect the dominant culture to recognize, belatedly, that the feminist anti-pornography movement has offered important insights that deserve consideration. In the context of a greater awareness of men's harassment, abuse, and violence against women in the wake of the #MeToo movement, one might expect greater interest in the relationship between pornography's sexism and women's everyday experience (Dines & Jensen, 2019).

In short: The feminist anti-pornography movement, exemplified in the writings of Andrea Dworkin, was right. The evidence to support this analysis continues to grow. The women who first made those arguments—Catharine MacKinnon (1987), Diana Russell (1993), Laura Lederer (1980), and many others—could not have known how right they would turn out to be, how accurately they saw into the nature of men's sexual exploitation of women in pornography.

But today this radical feminism is not only marginalized in the dominant culture, but also in women's studies departments and most feminist organizations. Postmodern and liberal approaches that do not challenge the pornography industry (Taormino, Penley, Shimizu, & Miller-Young, 2013) have come to dominate academic and political feminism in the United States. Radical feminism is often dismissed as being out of date, a philosophy for a previous era. At the University of Texas at Austin where I taught for many years, several female students told me that when they offered a radical feminist critique of

pornography in their women's studies classes, other students—and even some faculty members—refused to engage the argument. Some told me they kept quiet to avoid being shunned by classmates. One told me that classmates laughed at her arguments without offering a response.

But radical feminism is not dead, nor is the feminist critique of pornography. Radical feminist women, along with a few men, refuse to capitulate, continuing to analyze and write, to organize and educate. Two who have been most important in deepening my understanding are Dines, the founder of the education/advocacy group Culture Reframed and author of Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality (Dines, 2010), and Rebecca Whisnant, a philosophy professor and co-editor of Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography (Whisnant & Stark, 2004). I worked with them on a slide show in the early 2000s titled "Who wants to be a porn star? Sex and violence in today's pornography industry" for an earlier group, Stop Porn Culture. The critique offered by Dines and Whisnant, and a growing number of younger women who are embracing radical feminism, is more compelling than ever as a way to understand this pornography-saturated culture.

The basics of the radical feminist critique have not changed. Radical feminism continues to challenge the patriarchal claim that men have a right to own or control women's sexuality and reproductive power. A rejection of pornography is not prudish but progressive, and resistance to pornography is not an attack on freedom but a call for greater freedom. When feminists speak out against the sexual-exploitation industries—not only pornography but also prostitution, stripping, live sex shows, sex tourism—they are demanding that society take seriously its claim to support liberty and justice for all.

What is lost when a society continues to turn away from the radical feminist critique, even as that analysis becomes more compelling than ever? Obviously, girls and women suffer the psychological and physical injuries that come when sexual exploitation is not only tolerated but celebrated, as do some boys and vulnerable men. But all men also lose, because radical feminism is not only a powerful tool for women's liberation but also a gift to us. When men join that

movement, we are not only acting as allies to women but struggling to claim our own humanity.

For years I have been making this point: We men have a choice. We can "be a man," in the way that patriarchy defines that—by seeking that dominance over women and, by extension, anyone else deemed weaker. Or we can be a human being. We can't be both. To embrace masculinity in patriarchy is to surrender some of one's humanity. To claim to be fully human requires us to reject what patriarchy asks us to be, which includes rejecting all the ways men buy and sell objectified female bodies for sexual pleasure.

Radical feminism is a gift to men, offering us a way to struggle to be fully human rather than claiming the dominance that patriarchy promises us. We need not pretend we can individually transcend patriarchy simply by making feminist choices in our personal lives, but committing to personal change is part of a political struggle. We can recognize that we were socialized in a patriarchal society and pursue critical self-reflection. I can report such self-reflection is liberating—but also difficult, intensely painful at times, and a lifelong struggle.

My introduction to pornography came, as it does for so many boys in the post-Playboy world (I was born in 1958), in grade school, long before I was old enough for sexual intercourse. From magazines furtively passed among boys and hidden for repeated viewing, we moved on to movies (a middle-school group of friends successfully snuck into a few X-rated movies, through a back door with a defective lock), and eventually as an adult, going into pornographic movie theaters and bookstores through the front door. Like many, I felt conflicted about my use—the sexual arousal was intense, but it left me feeling uncomfortable. I sought intimacy and meaning in my sexual life, but I settled for stimulation that left me feeling isolated.

I wouldn't understand that discomfort until my introduction to the feminist critique, at the age of thirty when I returned to graduate school and studied the legal debates surrounding sexually explicit material. With a lifetime of training in a patriarchal society and no experience with feminism, I initially scoffed at the

feminist critique, assuming it was the work of angry and alienated women—after all, that's what I had long been told feminists were.

Within a few weeks of reading feminist work and meeting feminists, I realized I had a lot to learn. Within a year, I was committed to a feminist perspective and on my way to writing a dissertation exploring the pathology of pornography. Moving to the faculty at the University of Texas, I began trying to fashion an academic career and activist life that I hoped could make some small contribution to radical feminism and other movements for social justice and ecological sustainability.

In the mid-1990s, some of the foundational books of the anti-pornography movement that had been written in the 1980s needed to be supplemented with new work that reflected changes in technology and the culture. That led Dines, Ann Russo, and me to write Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality (Dines, Russo, & Jensen, 1998). One chapter included an analysis of recent trends in video pornography, which Dines and I wrote together based on a qualitative analysis of best-selling videos. We wanted to analyze what most consumers were watching, not simply pick out the most misogynistic films that would prove our point. After visiting pornography stores (this was before pornography moved online) and interviewing the clerks, we sat down with a stack of those popular VHS tapes and began the laborious work of identifying the patterns in the films, what media researchers call the "codes and conventions" of the genre.

More than two decades later, all I remember from those hours of work is one moment when Dines asked me to pause the video. We sat there, after watching countless scenes in which men's denigration of women was presented as sexually arousing, and Dines—her arms wrapped around herself seeking some kind of self-comfort—said, "I don't know how much more of this I can take." We sat quietly for a while. There was nothing to say. The work was painful, not only knowing what the women were being put through but also knowing how many men would masturbate to these images. Dines had to cope with knowing that men routinely see all women, including her, as objectified female bodies for

men's sexual pleasure. I had to cope with knowing that I had been socialized to see women that way. Like Dines, I felt a deep sense of grief, but I also was aroused by the films.

I continued to research and write about pornography and the feminist critique until the publication of my 2007 book, Getting Off. For that book I did a similar qualitative study of pornographic films, on DVD at that point, drawn from the most popular titles in industry rankings. I had intended to review fifteen, but when I took the tenth DVD out of the player, I stopped. I thought to myself, if I look at any more of this I will die. It sounds melodramatic, but I had reached my saturation point. Every film looked pretty much just like the others—which meant my research was over—and I just couldn't do it anymore.

For anyone raised with unearned advantages—men in patriarchy, white people in white supremacy, the citizens of powerful countries in a world structured by empire—facing that privilege is not automatic. Such unjust systems of power work to obscure the harsh realities of hierarchy. When we are willing to confront those realities, reckoning with the human suffering that undergirds our material comfort is particularly painful, as is realizing how long we have ignored that suffering.

Why go through all that? The most obvious answer is that we should be motivated to act on the moral principles we claim to hold, such as all people's rightful clam to dignity and equality. We should "do the right thing" when our principles demand it. Such an argument from justice is not always adequate motivation for any of us, however, which is why I also offer men an argument from self-interest: Radical feminism is a gift to us. But it may not be so obvious why embracing radical feminism makes our lives better. How is giving up a privileged position in my self-interest?

So, back to my initial claim: The sense of control over others and self that pornography promises is both illusion and delusion. I use these terms not with clinical precision—I am not now, nor have I ever been, a psychologist—but in an everyday sense. By illusion, I mean a misperception about something in the

world. By delusion, I mean a deeper misunderstanding about something that is fundamental to one's place and way of being in the world.

The illusion of pornography is that we control the sexual images we consume. The pornography industry offers a wide variety of sexual practices to spark an individual's imagination, variations that seem limitless online. We feel as if we are in control of pornography, yet pornography controls us. What seems like unending variety is actually the repetition of a few sexual scripts, and the most common is male dominance. We feel as if we are choosing, but the choices before us are narrow. Our imagination narrows rather than opens up. And for those men who find themselves falling into patterns of habitual use, control over the way we use pornography dissipates quickly. We may want to stop masturbating to pornography, but we find ourselves pulled back into the practice, in ways we cannot control. I remember both of those aspects of my own use of pornography as a boy and young man, before encountering the feminist critique, and that was in the pre-internet world that offered fewer images which took more effort to find.

The notion that men can flourish without intimacy is a delusion, an attempt to deny something that is fundamental to being fully human. Men in patriarchy may be trained to repress the need for deep intimacy, but we are human and that intimacy is part of being human. Intimacy is impossible if we cannot make ourselves vulnerable, and pornography is an attempt to escape from vulnerability, from being truly open to life in the presence of another person. Using pornography allows men to hide, to escape into a solitary place that offers the illusion of control and provides nothing beyond a quick and efficient path to an orgasm.

But wait, pornography's supporters might say, you are simply imposing your subjective value judgments on others. My response: I am not imposing anything on anyone. I am speaking from my experience, the experience of many others I have talked with, and a large body of research. I am not imposing but inviting others, particularly other men, to challenge themselves and each other.

Many men are trained to fear feminist challenges to male dominance, which can feel like challenges to our identity. I am inviting men to consider the possibility that those feminist challenges are the key not only to women's liberation but to our own.

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