

Pornography: Marxism, Feminism, and the Future of Sexuality. Alan Soble. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, 186 pages, \$21.50.

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Why can't men be more like women? Because they would have to become themselves first. Why don't they? Because first they would have to decide who *not* to be. Why are few women interested in the rest of this exchange? Because few women have much empathy with men.

Alan Soble asks the first of these questions, and its logical opposite, indirectly addresses the second, and amply illustrates the third. His resourceful and intelligent study is a major achievement in that it brings philosophy and sustained argument into a debate that has been marred by a high ratio of rhetoric and hogwash. The pornography debate is one of the most recent additions to the After Babel situations so diligently collected in Western culture. It is typically one in which people say what they think, thereby demonstrating who they think they are, but not *where* they are or how they got there. To some debaters, and even to a couple of scholars, whether men are present or absent in pornography, whether women are active or passive, pornography is BAD. To people who think like this, definition is irrelevant or unwelcome. So is function. And defence will be a special interest.

Professor Soble's program of analysis and defense may be extracted from the following.

The disagreement between those who claim that pornography primarily functions to stabilize the system and those who claim that it is mostly destabilizing is quite obviously difficult to resolve. A Marxist can assert that pornography is both functional and revolutionary. This duality results from its status as a superstructural [i.e., cultural] element in a system [i.e. capitalism] whose relations of production generate contradictions. Some people are not happy with such an uncourageous solution and for various reasons prefer to advance one or the other dramatically opposed answers [that one of its effects is "an increased willingness to accept 'the system'" or conversely that it is a "rape of republican institutions" (Soble quoting Marshall Cohen on both assertions)].

I do not intend to resolve the issue. The analysis of men's consumption of pornography presented [in the chapter "Male and Female Sexuality in Capitalism"] does, however, suggest that pornography is both stabilizing and destabilizing, although I do not think its effects are due to its being a species of political literature [as some feminists have ferociously argued]. If pornography allows men to adjust to recent advances of women by escaping into a fantasy world of retained power, then perhaps it stabilizes by smoothing the extension of bourgeois rights to women. At the same time, in smoothing this extension and thereby paving the way for further changes in patriarchal capitalism, pornography might destabilize (p. 105)

Rather elegant, I think, although, as with most arguments referring to both "capitalism" and "patriarchy" one should not inquire too deeply into which aspects of life are felt

to be causally related to which of the two societal states. Arguably, "patriarchy" generates contradictions as well if it is to be considered as valid, analytically, as "capitalism."

Soble, however, not even fearing the Voice of Mother emanating from feminist argument, plunges into his analysis, mentioned above, of female-male relations and of sexuality, inevitably centering on power relations in and out of pornography, on male versus female use of the senses, and, typically for a heterocentric approach, ignoring the extent to which compromise has already been built into male heterosexuality. On only two points are "power" and pornography not directly involved, and these are also the ones that are most obviously biased in the direction of American mores. One is when he talks about the "prevailing notion of masculinity: . . . the real man screws real women, he does not jerk off." Pornography as illustration of the state of the male mind creeps back in here because "the vast consumption of pornography implies that a good deal of masturbation is going on," indicating that "men are abandoning the idea that, to prove themselves, they need to seduce women" (p. 84). A North European male attempting to define himself and maleness in those terms would be openly discussed by his pals as latently homosexual.

The second point is one that, in American publications, significantly skews every dispute on pornography, on sexuality and on relations between women and men, and causes Soble to spend several pages on prostitution. Prostitutes in America are made victims twice over because of the hypocrisy that criminalizes them. Hence the insistence by Susan Griffin that a female pornography model is literally for sale, no matter in what type of performance she is depicted, and hence Kate Millet's 1971 metaphor of prostitutes and non-prostitutes on either side of a wall, and subsequent suggestion that prostitution should be the central concern of Women's Lib (in *Prostitution: A Quartet for Female Voices*). By extension, pornography kills the central concern by removing Millet's wall for the wrong reasons.

On power and powerlessness, estrangement and alienation, Soble alternately supports and undermines his arguments, fails to make use of studies illustrating the connection between pornography and art (Morse Peckham, Felix Pollak, and Kenneth Tynan) but tells us, under "Pornography in Capitalism: Powerlessness," that what we buy is "a partial picture of a fantasy world," that we use pictures and texts "not so much to learn of sexual variations but to obtain the visual and descriptive foundation upon which to build a fantasy. The brute [sic!] facts provided by the photograph are transformed into a fantastic scenario, and the consumer creates a drama in which he is director, participant, or member of the audience at will" (p. 80).

After this eloquent explanation-cum-defence in its own right comes one of the touches of humour that are going to damn him in the eyes of those who think that representations of sexual acts are degrading *per se*, or patriarchal, or that they exclude love: "Mr. X shall screw Ms. Y in position P and at time T while she wears/disrobes/reveals/lubricates/laughs/exclaims/resists/seduces/pouts/farts in exactly the way the consumer wants." Such versions of pornotopia, Soble says, provide an open window into men's minds.

To people who prefer not to know, or not to share, aspects of these minds, the logically enigmatic allegation that pornography is the theory and rape the practice unfortunately carries more convincing weight than Soble's lucid discourse on males and females in capitalism. In this section he discusses numerous issues and practices. Among them are, listed alternately from both sides of the gender line, "dismemberment syndrome," narcissism, the importance of vision, malleability and conformism, fixation, sexual insatiability, desensitization of the body, manufactured odours (!), atomism, holism, pornographic backlash, "feminine" morality, love on demand, rape

fantasies and other aspects of masculine and feminine under capitalism with, of course, division of labour and the global commodification, including the commodification of sexuality, in capitalism.

Soble is aware of the psycho-social complexities of the porn wars but being no psychologist (he is assistant professor of philosophy at St. John's University in Minnesota) he slips a number of arguments on these into notes rather than having them as text. Indeed, several times when parts of arguments seem missing to the informed reader, they appear in notes; even, again, humorously, as when in his refutation of the view that pornography depicts the "real" relation between the sexes, and that male masochist pornography is a particularly "cunning and effective argument for male dominance" (both by Andrea Dworkin, and both quoted/paraphrased on p. 89), and of Robin Morgan's ascription to "patriarchy" what people "as women" are "forced to endure" he wryly asks, "How many men can avoid situations in which there is pressure to kiss the boss's ass?" (p. 90n).

There is an implication that he suspects "power" might easily be considered a less unambiguous term than most present day westerners have become used to. What he says explicitly is that "men use pornography as compensation for their dire lack of power" (p. 81). This was all analysis. For his defence, Soble has picked a position that gives him a good perspective, the Marxian, post-scarcity, post-alienation, post-capitalist utopia. He makes no attempt to drag the young, the elder, and the middle Marx into the issue in their entirety but applies "a number of Marxist themes to pornography" (p. 2) and, generally, assumes "sympathy with the Marxist project and with the general principles of the women's movement" (p. 3).

Here is Marx at his most Messianic: ". . . the society that is fully developed produces man in all the richness of his being, the *rich man who is profoundly and abundantly endowed with all the senses*" (Soble, p. 121, Marx's italics), to which Soble adds, "True wealth, for Marx, is being able to employ one's senses fully to enjoy an object; it is not owning the object" (p. 123). In order to produce a working definition of communist people Soble more modestly settles for a post-scarcity society with "more fully developed individuals" in whom animosity towards sensuality has been eliminated by historical progress.

Given a communist reorganisation of society, he says, the production of pornography "satisfies the Marxist notion of nonalienated labor and, therefore, there can be no Marxist objection to the production of pornography in communism". On consumption he argues that "pornography will be appreciated by audiences in communism. This satisfies one of the conditions for nonalienated labor: it must be socially useful" (p. 141).

The presentation of the second part of his defense is considerably weaker than the first, and for a good reason. Marx's utopia was primarily a community of producers, of doers. In order to support his argument that something which is now a commodity will continue as a product of sensuous activity, Soble adds the variable of "spectator enjoyment," cautiously arguing that it will "have to be rescued from the trap of envy and apathy" and, generally, that delight in expert performances presupposes delight in the acts depicted, *and* projective abilities. What is going to disendear him in the eyes of feminists here is the obviously male characteristics of his imagined audience—and the transition towards live performances, which match his description much better than the photographs currently under attack.

First of all, however, he is implying that in communist society there will not only be more sharing, but also that different notions of privacy will prevail. His second addition to the Marxist groundwork is the "Aristotelian Principle" by John Rawls—with an important Marxist amendment by Soble himself.

Human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities. . . . Of two activities they do

equally well, they prefer the one calling on a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations. . . . Complex activities are more enjoyable because they satisfy the desire for variety and novelty of experience. . . . (p. 144, abbreviated by present author)

Soble's amendment to this principle of motivation reads: "Marxism does not see this as a true description of the deep psychology of humans; rather, the historical development of humans, dialectically with the development of production, is *generating* its truth" (p. 145, Soble's italics). An appropriate amendment since without it, in contemporary terms, Rawls' principle is both good and beautiful, but a number of readers will, like me, know several people to whom it does not apply. Some will know many. Under capitalism, granted. A Marxist Aristotelian principle applied to sexuality, Soble argues, tells us to expect an elaboration of sexual activity in the direction of a growing inventory of skills and discriminations. It would not be escalation, but inclusion. On this point, Soble must be trusting in the strength of his undisputed position, stated in the introduction, that sexual activity in itself is good rather than bad, since in this section, apart from quoting an impressive count of the number of possible variations of cunnilingus, the bulk of his text consists of other people's attacks on sexual variety—"the mathematics of sex," in George Steiner's words.

In determining the particulars of his Marxist position, Soble conscientiously examines the potential of the theories of Wilhelm Reich and Frederick Engels and, partly, Herbert Marcuse. He deserves merit for trying to make use of the (in Europe) overrated theories of Reich and Marcuse, and demonstrating why central elements in them must be given up in this framework. What remains, then, is stated thus: "From Engels I take a limited agnosticism" (p. 53), limited because he does not want to refrain from making predictions about sexuality in socialism. As Engels himself succinctly put it, "They will make their own practice."

Sexuality emotionally accommodates a number of elements that historically or structurally belong elsewhere. The reason this accommodation happens is that people's active minds *make* it happen. The content of pornography shows that it *does* happen. Assaults on "smut" and on "that which is degrading to women" are notoriously grounded in feelings about other matters. Conservatives argue against depictions of sexual love (Walter Berns), or they argue that depiction of love is impossible (Irving Kristol). At the same time feminists illustrate the confusion raging by telling us that pornography victimizes women because their lovers try to persuade them to do what they have seen in pornographic pictures (Diana Russell; Soble, p. 168-169) and that it makes men turn away from women altogether (Susan Brownmiller, p. 153), implying it is heterosexual pornography that makes men gay.

Soble does a good job of sorting feminist and conservative critiques, and in summing up the US debate since 1970 demonstrates the weakness of this apparent alliance. He only occasionally loses himself in futile argument; on subjective definitions, for example (as Ellen Levine of the Meese commission said ironically to Robert Scheer of *Playboy* in 1986, "What I like is erotica. Pornography is the filth *you* buy"); and on dehumanization. Futile on definitions because as long as many people, particularly women, don't conceptualize feelings well enough to describe their different *types* of arousal and response, anything goes—or rather nothing—and we get hallelujah notions like Charlotte Bunch's celebration of "our sexuality" and "the real beauty of women and of women loving women" (pp. 180; 181) and Gloria Steinem's "spontaneous yearning for closeness" (p. 176). And futile on dehumanization because no aspect of life under capitalism is entirely free of "dehumanization." The best work by the noblest mind is a commodity, and subject to market conditions. Typically, Soble's exposition on this issue becomes abstract to the point of self-contradiction. This is also one of

the issues on which, when his arguments on the formative power of capitalism weaken, he drags in the dead dog of patriarchy for convenience.

In Soble's functional description, pornography is "consumed in order to experience sexual arousal, to gratify sexual curiosity, to generate sexual fantasies, or otherwise to satisfy sexual desires, with or without masturbation" (p. 75). But because degradation of women is one of the feminist protesters' main definitions, this has become everybody's main issue, and Soble devotes a number of pages to a discussion of it, using arguments that penetrate where they are supposed to and are not, I think, too insulting to those who don't understand them. Despite the obviously mythopoeic quality of some feminist writing on this issue he tackles it with fairness and wit, and only Sally Wagner is accused of being in bad faith when she writes that "male violence is an ever present potential in pornography, waiting in the wings to make its appearance" (Soble, p. 20n).

The focus of his discussion of "degradation" is a photograph of heterosexual fellatio. Contrary to what a male colleague has been telling Soble, it is a useful one. Among the other possibilities he might have picked, child pornography would remove the emphasis from male-female relations (but is, on the other hand, a good example of something innocent, like children playing on a beach, being given a sexual interpretation in the user's mind). In a depiction of ritual brutality the representation of power structures would be given too much weight, compared to the sexual content, in the minds of people who are not aroused by this subgenre. And in lesbian porn, the estrangement between viewer and motive is too obvious for any argument on degradation to make much sense. It also immediately invokes a different type of analysis. In fellatio, however, an active partner is caressing a passive one with the obvious aim of pleasing him. It can lead to orgasm, but is non-reproductive and so will have to be seen as "sex for its own sake."

The social determination of sexual meaning (Soble's fine term) becomes obvious, then, when Susan Griffin, one of the stars of Bonnie Klein's film *Not a Love Story*, denounces the pornographic image of "a woman driven to the point of madness out of desire to put a man's penis in her mouth" (Soble, p. 115). With or without the "assumption . . . that fellatio is something nice girls do not do," the fact that depictions of it are considered degrading illuminate the uneasiness about female pursuit of pleasure, either one's own or one's partner's that underly feminist arguments on pornography. Notwithstanding Soble's hopes for a communist society with porn as well as with other sources of pleasure, a sexually egalitarian community with "mutual accommodation and convergence," there is reason to fear that women ideologues might want the non-alienated labour, but not the (possibility of) nonalienated sex.

There seems to be no certain way out of the porn-as-degradation trap since in a couple of versions, feminist arguments are consecutive: porn is degrading because the existence of it demonstrates inequalities, and with them the power that men have over women. Voilà! One of the most powerful arguments of Soble's book is sandwiched between Dworkin's and Griffin's descriptions, in loving detail, of how women suffer in sadomasochistic pornography, and is easily overlooked, so I'll reproduce it in full: "If men still have the power attributed to them by Dworkin, if women still accommodate to male sexuality, then pornography's content only repeats reality. And that which repeats reality leaves little room for the fantasizing that generates sexual arousal" (p. 88). This is only one of many examples of how Soble's clear and honest enquiry offsets the demagogic chant of the pornography warriors.

Partly through Jean Elshtain, writing in "The Victim Syndrome," Soble discovers the hidden agenda, the desire to tame male sexuality as we know it, and although he finds it as important to point out, with Alice Echols, that "the anti-pornography

movement represents a highly pragmatic attempt to unify a movement which has been seriously divided by the issues of class, race, and sexual preference" (p. 153f), he is conscious of one of the implications of the hidden issue: ". . . feminists want social arrangements that produce an audience composed of a certain type of person. Thus, the feminist aims at social conditions in which people are incapable of responding with sexual arousal to the rape, mutilation, and degradation of women, and the Marxist agrees that this state is achievable." Whereupon, of course, disagreement reappears because Marxists also know that that state is nowhere near us.

Also, in midst of the interesting but as I implied, barren pages on dehumanization he expresses awareness of the main absurdity of feminist readings, although, no semiologist, he makes limited use of it. A feminist looking at a pornographic photograph of a woman does not see a photograph of a woman but a woman in a photograph. That is no mere wordplay. This is why, looking on behalf of her sex, she considers herself and the entire womanhood of the world dragged inside the frame, sharing whatever conditions prevail in it. Soble puts this more gently as ". . . the women can be taken by viewers as representative," and goes on to say that "pornography is interpreted as making statements about all women" (p. 164). This original, structural fallacy explains the proliferation of literal interpretations of what pornography is and does. At Soble's end of the argument he finds it necessary to throw in a reminder from one of his own previous articles that pornography is non-propositional, merely fantasy, that it makes no assertions, and that to claim that it *says* women are sex objects or that it *endorses* that women should be treated as sex objects is incorrect (his italics). And his ordinary viewer, the user, does not see a poor, abused creature in a frame but "responds . . . to the woman's *showing* him her body or its parts; he responds to an action performed by a person expressing intentions" (p. 157, his italics). Although Soble's treatment is the most informed I have seen in any language he does allow himself the occasional illusion to appear in his text. He admits, for example, that feminists are right to complain about the dehumanizing features of today's porn: "its silly and repetitive sexism, its depiction or enactment of intentions to degrade and humiliate," and he makes the intriguing suggestion that offensive intentions can be eliminated from pornography. Given existing ideologies, this is none too likely. It is inevitable that offensive intentions will be read into *some* pornography, for depictions of sadomasochistic acts will, for example, to non-users inevitably look like violence. Soble himself to some degree defuses his argument on this point and, having access to a myriad of American sources, of course finds a conservative to whom it is precisely the intention to arouse that is damning.

The feminist anti-porn movement, like fundamentalism, like fascism, is an escape from ambiguity undertaken at a point when political strategies began to fail; it was becoming clear that economic independence for women benefits the white, middleclass, nuclear *family* rather than individuals or other types of family. There have been attempts to import their arguments into North Europe, but at least on the continent they usually fall flat after a while, partly because the prostitution angle is less convincing under different legal conditions, and partly because the racism fueling the rape angle is inoperative. One of the unstated bases of the argument about the connection between porn and rape seems to be a number of white women's fear of able bodied black men. To which should be added a factor or two. Soble, in discussing Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* (1975) quotes a remark by Angela Davis about the absence of black sisters from the anti-rape movement. The reason, Davis said, was "the movement's indifferent posture toward the frame-up rape charge as an incitement to racist aggression." More black women per capita note about Brownmiller's treatment of black rapists in her book (p. 155).

Pornography and, I suspect, sex, triggers some odd notions of collectivity. Take, for example, Helen Hazen's remark, "Women agree: masturbating men make them nervous" (Soble, p. 173). No, they don't: *they* don't. The sight of a masturbating man is arousing. Anyone agreeing is welcome to join in the implied "we." People seem to harbor radically different feelings about the distance and relation implied in sexuality and representations thereof. Even so, illusory notions tend to appear at regular intervals, this time most often under the label of feminism.

If philosophers could change the world, what would they do in this field? They would read Soble's 186 pages for a start, enjoy his eleven-page bibliography and become assured that even though a number of well-known representatives of *wimmin* have made themselves custodians of femininity they are not the only female American voices on sexuality and female-male relationships. Besides Elshtain and Echols, who both received a brief mention above, there are Pat Galafia, Alison Jaggar, and Paula Webster on specific issues. And there is Gayle Rubin, whose overall approach Soble admires, although he makes no direct use of it.