Pornography and Power

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In the 1980s, the battle between antipornography feminists and anticensorship “feminist sex radicals”1 seemed to be the defining issue for feminist theory and politics. The Supreme Court’s 1986 decision to uphold without appeal a lower court ruling that the antipornography ordinance drafted by Catharine MacKinnon and passed by the city council of Indianapolis was unconstitutional seemed to settle, at least in the United States, the legal issues in the debate.2 This legal resolution, however, has by no means resolved the broader philosophical questions raised by the debate.3 When it was at its height, the feminist pornography debate tended to generate more heat than light. Only now that there has been a cease fire in the sex war does it seem possible to reflect on the debate in a more productive way and to address some of the questions that were left unresolved by it. In this paper, I shall argue that one of the major unresolved questions is that of how feminists should conceptualize power. The antipornography feminists and the feminist sex radicals presuppose radically different conceptions of power, and this fact helps to explain why they come to such different conclusions about what, if anything, should be done about pornography. The feminist pornography debate remains unresolved precisely because it is unresolvable in the terms in which it has been posed. I shall contend that the conceptions of power presupposed on both sides of the debate are incomplete, and, therefore, inadequate.4 My hope is that once we recognize this, we might be able to improve not only the way that feminists analyze pornography but also the way we conceptualize power.

The feminist debate over pornography can be approached from a number of different angles: one might view it as primarily a disagreement about First Amendment law and focus on the issues of censorship, obscenity, and speech versus action;5 one might consider it to be primarily a debate over how to conceive of representation and concentrate on discussions of representation and the role of the viewer or reader in processing and interpreting representations;6 or one might analyze it as a conflict over how to think about violence and address various attempts to distinguish (violent) pornography from (nonviolent) erotica and to conceptualize sexual violence.7 Since my focus will be on the conceptions of power that are implicit in various feminist perspectives on pornography, I will not deal with these other issues directly. Although this may seem a somewhat limited perspective on the vast array of theoretical issues raised by the feminist pornography debate, I think it is justified for two reasons. First, as will become clear below, the relationship between pornography and power is central to the analyses of the parties on both sides of the fence; thus, an examination of the
way the concept of power figures in the pornography debate may prove helpful for moving the debate forward. Second, the concept of power itself is highly contested among feminists; thus, an analysis of the way that conceptions of power are deployed in the discussion of a specific social issue such as pornography may prove useful for sorting out the strengths and weaknesses of competing conceptions of power.

I shall proceed as follows: first, I will consider the position of antipornography feminists, reconstruct the conception of power implicit in this view, and discuss the inadequacies of this conception. I will take the work of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin to be representative of this position. Next, I will do the same for the feminist sex radical position, taking as representative the writers associated with FACT (the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce), MacKinnon and Dworkin’s main feminist opponents. Finally, I will suggest an alternative conception of power, one that is designed to help us to move beyond the conceptual limitations implicit in the feminist pornography debate.

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Power is clearly a central concept for the antipornography feminist analysis. As Andrea Dworkin claims, “the major theme of pornography as a genre is male power, its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning. . . . Male power is the raison d’etre of pornography; the degradation of the female is the means of achieving this power.” In this passage, Dworkin expresses succinctly what I take to be the crucial features of the antipornography feminist account of the relationship between pornography and power: at bottom, pornography is about power, power is about having power over others, and having power over others is about domination.

MacKinnon and Dworkin frame their views about power, gender, and sexuality in terms of a rejection of a more conventional view of gender difference, according to which differences between men and women are in themselves unobjectionable and it is only the costs and benefits that are unjustly attached to those differences that are cause for concern. They view gender difference as a function of male domination: domination is prior to differences between men and women; indeed, domination creates gender differences, which are then appealed to by the dominant group as a justification for maintaining the system of dominance. Differences between men and women, far from being natural or given, are simply the reified effects of a system of domination and subordination. Domination is thus implicated in the very formation of gender itself. From this it follows that “men are the way they are because they have power, more than that they have power because they are the way they are. If this is so, women who succeed to male forms of power will largely be that way too.” Thus, for antipornography feminists, the goal of feminist activism is not to grant women equal access to power, but instead to dismantle this system of domination.

The upshot of this view is that, as MacKinnon puts it, “women/men is a distinction not just of difference, but of power and powerlessness . . . power/powerlessness is the sex difference.” According to this view, men
are powerful and women are powerless as such, from which it follows that all men dominate women, and all women are dominated by men. In other words, the domination relation between men and women is pervasive. As Dworkin puts this point, “intercourse occurs in a context of a power relation that is pervasive and incontrovertible. The context in which the act takes place . . . is one in which men have social, economic, political, and physical power over women. Some men do not have all these kinds of power over all women; but all men have some kinds of power over all women.” Moreover, if one takes seriously the claim that gender difference itself is a function of domination, then one is compelled to draw the much stronger conclusion that heterosexual intercourse itself, as it is currently constructed, is subordinating to women (and not just that it occurs in a context of domination and subordination). Indeed, this seems to be MacKinnon’s point when she writes:

Sexuality . . . is not a discrete sphere of interaction or feeling or sensation or behavior in which preexisting social divisions may or may not be played out. It is a pervasive dimension of social life, . . . a dimension along which gender occurs and through which gender is socially constituted. . . . Dominance eroticized defines the imperatives of its masculinity, submission eroticized defines its femininity. . . . [S]exuality itself is the dynamic of the inequality of the sexes.

It is this understanding of heterosexuality as an institution and heterosexual intercourse as a practice that provides the rationale for MacKinnon’s and Dworkin’s critique of pornography. MacKinnon and Dworkin claim that pornography provides a unique window into this hierarchical, heterosexual realm; as MacKinnon puts it, pornography tells us what men want sexually, it tells the “truth about sex,” as sex is defined in a male-dominated culture:

from the testimony of the pornography, what men want is: women bound, women battered, women tortured, women humiliated, women degraded and defiled, women killed. Or, to be fair to the soft core, women sexually accessible, have-able, there for them, wanting to be taken and used, with perhaps just a little light bondage. Each violation of women—rape, battery, prostitution, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment—is made sexuality, made sexy, fun, and liberating of women’s true nature in the pornography.

On the basis of this kind of characterization, MacKinnon and Dworkin, in the antipornography ordinance that they drafted for the city of Minneapolis, offer the following definition of pornography: “Pornography is the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words.”

Now, this view has been widely criticized. But what commentators have yet to make explicit is the fact that many of the shortcomings of MacKinnon and Dworkin’s analysis of pornography are rooted in the shortcomings of the conception of power that they presuppose. In the remainder of this
section, I shall focus, first, on the conceptual problems inherent in the way that MacKinnon and Dworkin understand power in general and domination and subordination in particular, and second, on the implications of these conceptual problems for their analysis of pornography.

First, MacKinnon and Dworkin’s conception of power is reductive. Not only does it reduce all power relations to relations of domination and subordination, which is evident from the way the term “power” is used interchangeably with terms like “domination” and “degradation,” it further reduces relations of domination and subordination to a set of dyadic, master/subject relations. 19 Conceiving of domination on a dyadic model might have made sense two centuries ago, when women were viewed as property of their fathers or husbands and the legal doctrine of coverture was still in place. But the world of late-twentieth-century Western industrialized nations is quite different, and although vestiges of those legal doctrines persist (for example, in the fact that “marital rape” is apparently still an oxymoron in some parts of the United States), for the most part domination and subordination have taken more diffuse social and cultural forms. A dyadic master/subject conception of domination is ill-equipped to make sense of these sorts of power relations.20

Second, the claim that men are powerful and women powerless as such implies that women are solely (innocent) victims and men solely (guilty) masters. This is inadequate for a couple of reasons. First, it ignores the ways that some women are in position of dominance and the ways in which some men are subordinated on the basis of race, class, and sexuality. If women are by definition thoroughly powerless, as MacKinnon and Dworkin claim, then it seems impossible to view white, middle-class, heterosexual women as themselves being in a position of social dominance. Clearly, as many critics have noted,21 this is a problem insofar as it renders their view incapable of fully illuminating the intersections among the multiple axes of stratification of racism, class oppression, sexism, and heterosexism. MacKinnon and Dworkin repeatedly discuss racial and class oppression and attempt to connect these issues with their analysis of gender and sexuality. Given their overly simplistic understanding of power, however, they are unable to give a fully adequate account of this phenomenon. The best they can do is to offer an argument by analogy: the master/subject relation between black men and black women is analogous to the master/subject relation between white men and white women, only it has the added dimension of race. As Angela Harris puts it in her critique of MacKinnon, according to this view, “black women become white women, only more so.”22 One lesson that feminists are sure to have learned from recent debates about identity politics is that this view is unacceptable; addressing the problems with this sort of view requires us not only to rethink our conception of identity, but also to rethink our conception of power.

A further problem with this view is that the depiction of women as victims also threatens to undercut the very aim of feminism: the empowerment of women. If women are powerless, and men are powerful, as such, then MacKinnon draws the obvious inference when she claims that female power is “a contradiction in terms, socially speaking.”23 But if female
power is a contradiction in terms, then how is it possible for women to be empowered to resist? Given the way that they conceptualize power, this is a question that MacKinnon and Dworkin are unable to answer. Indeed, the best MacKinnon can do is to challenge her readers to “invent the capacity to act.” The conception of power presupposed by the antipornography feminists does not, however, offer us the theoretical resources necessary for envisioning such an invention. The antipornography feminist position relies on an incomplete conception of power that reduces power as a whole to one of its modalities (dominating power over others) and further reduces domination as a whole to one of its forms (the master/subject relationship).

It is these more basic conceptual problems with the antipornography feminists’ conception of power that generate many of the inadequacies (frequently noted by critics) of their analysis of pornography. First, MacKinnon and Dworkin focus so much on male domination in the form of the master/subject, heterosexual dyad that they are blind to or unconcerned with the fact that their ordinance grants a great deal of power to the state and trusts the state to regulate pornography in a way that is favorable to women. In light of the fact that existing antipornography legislation in Canada has been used primarily to target lesbian pornography and even Dworkin’s own work, this trust seems naive and misplaced. Second, because they see female power as a contradiction in terms, they have to explain away as false consciousness many women’s claims that performing in and/or consuming pornography can be personally empowering. Although such claims should not necessarily be taken at face value, it seems incumbent upon feminists to take women’s accounts of their own experience seriously. Finally, because MacKinnon and Dworkin think that men are powerful and women powerless as such, they ignore the possibility that pornography might be about both male power and male powerlessness. Although pornography certainly bolsters male power at a cultural level, it might at the same time undermine such power at a personal level, by creating an unrealistic conception of male virility and sexuality that few, if any, men are able to live up to in their real lives.

Ironically, the reductive account of power presupposed by antipornography feminists leads them to mirror the view of women found in the very pornography they find so repugnant: women as thoroughly subjugated, dominated, and rendered completely passive and submissive.

As Sally Tisdale puts it, the antipornography feminists are concerned with how men act and how women are portrayed. Women cannot make free sexual choices. . . . What a misogynistic worldview this is, this claim that women who make such choices cannot be making free choices at all—are not free to make a choice. Feminists against pornography have done a sad and awful thing: They have made women into objects.

Although it is altogether too strong to suggest that the antipornography feminists have made women into objects, the point that they are too willing to mirror the view of women that they see in pornography in their own theories is well-taken.
As Lisa Duggan makes clear, the feminist sex radicals “are against misogyny in sexually explicit materials. We are not against sexually explicit materials per se.”³⁰ In this way, the sex radicals emphasize the need to distinguish the “necessary critique of sexism in pornography” from what they call the antipornography feminists’ “campaign for the legal suppression of sexual imagery.”³¹ The major difference between the feminist sex radicals and the antipornography feminists, then, concerns not so much the question of whether or not much pornography in our culture is sexist, but the question of how sexism itself is to be understood and conceptualized. The feminist sex radicals certainly agree that power, gender, and sexuality are complexly intertwined; they disagree, however, with MacKinnon and Dworkin’s analysis of these concepts. Specifically, they reject first, the claim that power can be reduced to relations of domination and subordination; second, the claim that heterosexual intercourse can be understood in terms of a male-master/female-subject relationship. It is these conceptual disagreements with antipornography feminism that ultimately explain the feminist sex radicals’ position vis-à-vis the ordinance.

The first point of disagreement is motivated by the conceptual worry that by reducing power to domination, the antipornography feminists leave the whole domain of empowerment and resistance to domination untheorized. As I argued above, because MacKinnon equates power with domination and then claims that power is something that men have and women do not, she is compelled to claim that female power is a contradiction in terms. The feminist sex radicals, by contrast, worry that the reduction of power to domination coupled with the claim that women are powerless by definition makes it impossible to view women as autonomous agents who have the power to do things in the world, who have the ability or capacity to act.³² Carole Vance even goes so far as to suggest that this way of conceptualizing women’s situation actually exacerbates women’s lack of autonomy and power: “If women increasingly view themselves entirely as victims through the lens of the oppressor and allow themselves to be viewed that way by others, they become enfeebled and miserable.”³³ Instead of seeing women as powerless by definition, the feminist sex radicals conceive of power such that both the reality of male domination and the reality of female power, empowerment, and agency are taken seriously. As Ann Snitow puts it, “women will be victimized while we lack power. But even now we are not completely powerless. In fact, we are in the midst of complex power negotiations with men all the time. . . . However silenced and objectified we may be in the prevailing culture, we are not only silenced, not only objectified.”³⁴ And to say that we are is “to deny women any agency at all in the long history of heterosexuality.”³⁵

The second point of disagreement between the feminist sex radicals and antipornography feminists—at least with respect to the issue under consideration here, namely, how to conceptualize power—has to do with the claim that heterosexual intercourse in our culture is in itself or by its very nature subordinating. Contra this view, the feminist sex radicals
maintain that women retain the power to act in the domain of sexuality. Lisa Duggan maintains that all those who embrace the antipornography view share the belief that sexuality is "a terrain of female victimization and degradation; none of them offers a vision of female sexual subjectivity, of female power and joy in the sexual arena." As Kate Ellis puts it, the feminist sex radicals insist, contra the antipornography feminists, "that women have some degree of sexual autonomy. They may have fewer options than men, and older women fewer than younger women, and poor women fewer than rich women, but this does not mean that they have no control over their lives and their sexuality."

As a result of their disagreements with MacKinnon and Dworkin over how to understand power, domination, and sexuality, the feminist sex radicals reject the definition of pornography put forward in the ordinance. As Duggan puts it, one of the major goals of feminist sex radical position is "to counter antiporn accounts of 'pornography' as a unified (patriarchal) discourse with a singular (misogynistic) impact. Against this account we argued that the sexually explicit materials called 'pornography' are full of multiple, contradictory, layered, and highly contextual meanings." Whereas antipornography feminists maintain that pornography has a single function—namely, to humiliate, degrade, and subordinate women—the feminist sex radicals maintain that it functions in myriad ways. Indeed, they maintain that it is possible for women to be empowered by the production and/or consumption of pornography, in spite of the sexist message of much mainstream pornography. Sally Tisdale's description of her desire for pornography brings out the sense of the feminist sex radicals' claim that pornography can be empowering for women: "I want not to accommodate to pornography but to claim it. I want to be the agent of sex. I want to own sex, as though I had a right to these depictions, these ideas, as though they belonged to us all." So even in heterosexual intercourse, and even in mainstream pornography, female power is decidedly not a contradiction in terms for these feminists.

It is precisely this point, however, that brings out the key problem with the sex radicals' conception of power. These feminists focus so much on women's empowerment and ability to resist domination that they tend to presuppose too rosy a picture of the possibilities for resistance and subversion of male domination through the consumption of pornography. In other words, their conception of power suffers from the inverse of one of the problems that MacKinnon and Dworkin ran into: whereas the antipornography feminists' account of power made women's empowerment seem impossible, a contradiction in terms, the feminist sex radicals' account makes it seem altogether too easy. This problem becomes clear when the feminist sex radicals go beyond simply claiming that there is a space for empowerment and agency for women in heterosexual intercourse and even in pornography (that is, that women are not wholly victims) and go on to claim that pornography itself is socially subversive and that the consumption of pornography is tantamount to an act of resistance to patriarchy.
The claim that pornography itself is socially subversive is connected to the feminist sex radicals’ belief that pornography undermines social/cultural norms about sexuality and challenges our culture’s Victorian repression of sexuality. Thus, according to this analysis, it is not just that pornography does not harm women in the way that MacKinnon and Dworkin describe, it is also that pornography has positive social benefits:

[p]ornography has served to flout conventional sexual mores, to ridicule sexual hypocrisy and to underscore the importance of sexual needs. Pornography creates many messages other than woman-hating: it advocates sexual adventure, sex outside of marriage, sex for no reason other than pleasure, casual sex, anonymous sex, group sex, voyeuristic sex, illegal sex, public sex. Some of these ideas appeal to women reading or seeing pornography, who may interpret some images as legitimating their own sense of sexual urgency or desire to be sexually aggressive.

The feminist sex radicals maintain that this putative derepressive function of pornography is good for all of us, since it is presumed not only that sexual repression is a bad thing for all of us, but also that sexual repression is an incontrovertible fact about our culture. Furthermore, these feminists maintain that the derepressive function of pornography is especially good for women, since women tend to be harmed more than men by sexual repression: after all, it is a sexually repressive culture that creates the myths that good girls do not like sex, are not sexually aggressive; that all girls who do like sex or are sexually aggressive are bad, are sluts; and that all girls are either good or bad, virgins or sluts (or, paradoxically, both at once).

Ellen Willis expresses this view succinctly when she writes, “pornography is the return of the repressed, of feelings and fantasies driven underground by a culture that atomizes sexuality, defining love as a noble affair of the heart and mind, lust as a base animal urge centered in unmentionable organs.” In Willis’s view, defining pornography as the enemy will only have the effect of making women even more ashamed of and guilty about their sexuality, “and the last thing women need is more sexual shame, guilt, and hypocrisy—this time served up as feminism.” Gayle Rubin echoes this when she claims that “Western cultures generally consider sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force. . . . This culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent.” According to this analysis, women’s sexuality is repressed by the Victorian, bourgeois morality that predominates in our culture, and pornography blatantly and irreverently challenges this stifling, hypocritical, sex-negative worldview. Thus, even the violent, sexist imagery in mainstream pornography can be radically liberating for the sexually repressed woman:

A woman who is raped is a victim; a woman who enjoys pornography (even if that means enjoying a rape fantasy) is in a sense a rebel, insisting on an aspect of her sexuality that has been defined as a male
preserve. Insofar as pornography glorifies male supremacy and sexual alienation, it is deeply reactionary. But in rejecting sexual repression and hypocrisy—which have inflicted even more damage on women than on men—it expresses a radical impulse.44

In other words, because pornography undermines and subverts our culture’s repressive attitude toward sexuality, and because that attitude is a weapon of male domination in that it punishes women for their sexuality more than men, consuming pornography is seen as in itself an act of resistance to patriarchy.

There is a problem, however, with the claim that pornography functions as the liberator of a repressed sexuality. As anyone with even a passing familiarity with Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* knows, what Foucault called “the repressive hypothesis”—the belief that we late-twentieth-century Westerners are sexually repressed—is highly suspect. Foucault makes this point with a simple yet brilliant argument: if we were sexually repressed, then we would not talk about sex very much. (This much seems reasonable as a partial definition of sexual repression, although a full definition would presumably make reference not just to how, when, and how much we talk about sex but also to how, when, and how much we “have” sex.) But, Foucault argues, it is not the case that we do not talk about sex very much; indeed, during the very time that we have allegedly been so repressed, discourses about sexuality have proliferated at an astounding rate. We simply can’t stop talking about sex. Thus, it must be the case that we are not—or are not merely—sexually repressed.45 Indeed, Foucault suggests that one of the most insidious ways that power functions with respect to sexuality is precisely by inciting us to speak about sex, by compelling us to confess our deepest desires and darkest fantasies, by demanding that we explore, express, and tell the truth about our sexuality, in short, by producing discourses of sexuality.

Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis is related to what is perhaps his most profound insight into the study of power: that power does not function solely negatively; instead, power functions both negatively and productively, and it does both at once, producing the very subjects that it constrains. Thus, Foucault makes it clear that his critique is not meant to establish that the repressive hypothesis is simply false:

I do not maintain that the prohibition of sex is a ruse; but it is a ruse to make prohibition into the basic and constitutive element from which one would be able to write the history of what has been said concerning sex starting from the modern epoch. . . . I would like . . . to search instead for instances of discursive production (which also administer silences, to be sure), of the production of power (which sometimes have the function of prohibiting).46

In short, Foucault maintains that the repressive hypothesis is not so much false as incomplete and, thus, inadequate. Power does not merely function by saying “don’t” (*Bad girl, don’t touch*); it also functions by saying “do” (*That feels good, do that again*).
What this brief excursus into Foucault's genealogy of power shows is that there is an oversimplification at work in the feminist sex radicals' conceptualization of empowerment. It is certainly true, as the feminist sex radicals maintain, that women are sexual agents who are powerful in the sense of having the ability or capacity to act and that any feminism that denies this, as the MacKinnon/Dworkin variety does, is conceptually unsatisfactory. Yet just as the antipornography feminists presuppose too simplistic a conception of domination, the feminist sex radicals presuppose too simplistic a conception of empowerment. The feminist sex radicals' faith in the repressive hypothesis leads them to ignore the ways in which the very agency and empowerment that they claim for women may be implicated in the relations of domination and subordination that feminists are trying to criticize. In other words, they conflate empowerment with resistance, which means that they fail to recognize that we might be empowered to act in various ways that actually uphold or reinforce existing relations of domination and subordination rather than subvert or undermine such relations. They seem to think that we can appeal to what turns us on, as if this is automatically liberating and subversive, as if this is where the argument should stop. But what Foucault teaches us, via his critique of the repressive hypothesis, is that power functions not only by preventing us from acting or by prohibiting us from doing what turns us on (although it does this too), but also by enabling us to act, by producing our turn-ons themselves, and by compelling us to talk about our desires, to get in touch with our sexuality, and to confess our guilty pleasures. Thus, an appeal to what we desire is not where the argument should stop, but where it should start.

Pornography and Power Reconsidered

I have argued that both the antipornography feminists and the feminist sex radicals presuppose inadequate and incomplete conceptions of power. The antipornography position is inadequate because it reduces all of power to dyadic, master/subject relations of sexual domination; this reduction has the effect of making women's power in the form of resistance to existing relations of domination seem impossible. The feminist sex radicals' position is inadequate because it fails to illuminate the way that empowerment itself is implicated in the relations of domination and subordination that feminists are trying to criticize and because it conflates empowerment with resistance; this failure has the opposite effect of making resistance to existing relations of domination seem too easy. Thus, neither side illuminates the complex dialectical relationship between domination and empowerment; as a result, neither of these positions in the feminist pornography debate can ultimately satisfy us.

The important lesson to learn from the feminist pornography debate is that it matters quite a bit how we think about power. This debate clearly shows that how we conceptualize power has a profound impact on how we decide what kinds of laws, policies, institutions, and political agendas we are willing to support and also that we do not yet have the kind of
conception of power that can serve as a sure and steady guide as we make those choices.

What kind of conception of power can serve as such a guide? The fact that the common problem with the antipornography feminists’ and the feminist sex radicals’ conception of power is that each is incomplete suggests that a more adequate feminist analysis of power will have to be much broader than either of those discussed above. Clearly, a feminist analysis of power has to be able to illuminate the power that men exercise over women, but it must do so in a way that simultaneously illuminates the power that some women exercise over others by virtue of their race, class, or sexual privilege. It will have to do this, however, in a way that does not obscure the power to act that those who are subordinated retain in spite of their subordination. Furthermore, an adequate feminist analysis of power should enable us to understand how such individual empowerment is related to the power that women are able to exercise collectively, in relations of solidarity with others. In other words, one general lesson we can learn from the pornography debate is that an adequate feminist analysis of power needs to be expansive rather than reductive; it needs to illuminate different modalities of power, including power-over, power-to, and power-with. In the remainder of this section, I will spell out an alternative conception of power that meets this desideratum and explain how such a conception provides a useful framework for analyzing pornography.49

In addition to conceiving of power broadly so that it encompasses not just power-over, but power-to and power-with as well, a better feminist conception of power will resist the temptation, evident in the antipornography feminist analysis, to reduce power-over to domination and domination to master/subject relations. Instead, a more adequate feminist analysis would recognize that domination is one form that exercising power over someone else can take (where “exercising power over” is understood roughly as “constraining that person’s options in some nontrivial way”); in particular, it is a way of exercising power over someone else in a way that is harmful to that person. But there might be ways of exercising power over someone else that are actually for the benefit of that person; parenting might be taken to be a paradigm case of such a relationship, insofar as the parent exercises power over the child but does so in a way that is for the child’s own good. (Of course, this is not necessarily the case; sadly, many parents could be said to dominate their children.) In light of the feminist interest in the practice of mothering,50 making this distinction between domination and a beneficent exercise of power-over seems particularly important.

So there is good reason to think that we ought not reduce power-over to domination, as the antipornography feminists do. Moreover, and more important for this discussion, we must also resist the temptation to reduce domination to a master/subject model. We must recognize that although domination certainly can take the form of a master/subject relation, it is more often the case in contemporary Western societies that domination takes more fluid cultural and social forms. Moreover, if we hope to be able to illuminate the complex relationships among multiple systems of domination and subordination based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, we will
have to adopt a more complex and nuanced account of domination than the master/subject model. A more adequate feminist analysis of power will go beyond the master/subject dyad and will also examine the ways in which domination inheres in the background cultural understandings and representations, social practices, institutions, and social structures that form the context within which dyadic relationships between individual men and women take shape. These cultural and social mechanisms put individuals in different power positions relative to one another, so that it still makes sense to talk about certain individuals being in positions of power over others. What does not make sense, according to this model of power, is the claim that some groups have all the power and others have none.

Thus far, there are three major elements of the feminist analysis of power that I am suggesting: a broader conceptualization of power, such that power encompasses power-over, power-to (empowerment), and power-with; a broader understanding of power-over, such that power-over can be understood as harmful (in which case it is equated with domination) or as beneficial; and a broader understanding of domination, such that the focus of analysis shifts from the master/subject dyad to the background social and cultural conditions that shape dyadic power relations. The need to modify our conceptions of power-over and domination is not, however, the only lesson we can learn from antipornography feminism; MacKinnon and Dworkin’s inability to conceptualize women’s empowerment also challenges us to rethink the relationship between power-over or domination and power-to or empowerment. The analysis of power that I am suggesting follows Foucault in recognizing what Judith Butler has called the “paradox of subjectivation,” which consists in the fact that at the same time that we are subjected to the domination relations in our society, we are simultaneously made into a subject with the capacity to act in and through those very relations of domination. In other words, although women are subjected to and constrained by the set of unjust power relations that allow men to exercise power over women, those power relations are also the very social and cultural conditions that enable us to be subjects and agents who have the power to act. Conceiving of the relationship between power-over (specifically, in this case, domination) and power-to (empowerment) in this way allows this feminist conception of power to overcome the tendency of antipornography feminists to portray male domination as a monolithic, seamless force that so thoroughly subjects women that it renders them practically inert.

Just as there are lessons to be learned from the shortcomings of antipornography feminism’s conception of power, however, there are also lessons to be learned from the shortcomings of the feminist sex radicals’ conception. Specifically, the problems that the latter conception encounters reveal the need for feminists to modify our understandings of empowerment and resistance. Although the feminist sex radicals were right to emphasize women’s empowerment even in the face of male domination, their conception of empowerment encountered two related problems: first, it too failed to recognize the ways in which domination and empowerment are complexly intertwined; second, and perhaps as a result of the first, it
tended to conflate empowerment with resistance. To avoid these two problems, we should call into question the feminist sex radicals’ assumption that empowerment necessarily entails resistance to or subversion of relations of domination. It seems clear that empowerment is a precondition for resistance to or subversion of relations of domination, but empowerment itself may also be bound up with and implicated in relations of domination. In other words, one might be empowered in the sense of being endowed with the capacity to act in a way that upholds or reinforces relations of domination. Thus, the fact that a representation, practice, cultural understanding, or experience is empowering does not necessarily mean that it is also subversive. Although the feminist sex radicals are right to emphasize that women are empowered in and through sex, and even potentially in and through the production and/or consumption of pornography, it does not follow that by having sex or performing in or consuming pornography women are resisting or subverting either masculine domination or repressive bourgeois morality; they might very well be internalizing, hence, reinforcing those systems of power. A more adequate feminist analysis of power would recognize that we are always empowered at the same time and by the same norms, institutions, practices, and structures to which we are subjected, but that this feature of power relations only provides for the possibility of resistance to or subversion of these norms, institutions, practices, and structures; it does not ensure such resistance or subversion. In other words, such an analysis would distinguish between empowerment, which we might define as having the ability or capacity to act (not being wholly a victim), and resistance, which we might understand as a particular way of being empowered, namely being empowered to resist or subvert an instance of domination.

Linda Williams’s analysis of hard-core film pornography contains some elements of the conception of power that I am suggesting but also falls short in ways that are illustrative. In her introduction, Williams criticizes both feminist and nonfeminist parties to the debate over pornography for failing to understand the interrelation of power (which she tends to equate with domination) and pleasure (which she tends to equate with empowerment) in the genre. She writes, “the very marginality of pornography within culture has led us to argue only about whether pornography, like sex, should be liberated or repressed. And the fact that, as with sex, we simultaneously take for granted its ‘obvious’ definition—assuming, for example, that it is either a liberating pleasure or an abusive power—has only confused matters.” Instead of accepting this either/or dichotomy, Williams suggests that “women must also be flexible enough to locate their own empowering points of resistance within discursive practices that are no longer taken as essential truths.” According to Williams, hard-core film pornography is one such discursive practice that may no longer be taken as an essential truth, and Williams notes that her analysis of hard core is undertaken in the spirit of finding the points of resistance within the genre.

Throughout the book, Williams makes a point of highlighting the ways that (dominating) power and (empowering) pleasure intertwine. For
instance, in her analysis of integrated hard-core films—films in which the sexual numbers are integrated into the narrative structure of the film—Williams stresses that “[e]ven though pleasure is paramount, . . . negotiation for power and within pleasure often occurs in the integrated form of the genre. This point is worth stressing. Pornography is not a monolith, either of apolitical pleasure or of unpleasurable power. Integrated pornos ‘play with fire’ the most actively.” In particular, Williams claims that the film Loose Ends provides an excellent example of this phenomenon and “clearly states one of the new ‘truths’ of integrated feature-length hard-core: that pleasure can be negotiated through (limited) power, that sex is no longer a ‘microdrama of male dominance and female passivity’ but a drama of both power and pleasure.”

Although Williams does a good job of attending to this interrelationship between power and pleasure, she tends throughout to conflate pleasure with empowerment and empowerment with resistance. I am somewhat suspicious of the conflation of pleasure with empowerment. It seems entirely possible (1) to be empowered by things that are unpleasant or painful, (2) to be paralyzed or immobilized rather than empowered by extreme pleasure, and (3) to find empowerment enormously frightening and even excruciatingly painful. I am more concerned, however, about the second conflation because, as I argued above, although it seems clear that empowerment provides a condition of possibility for resistance, it does not guarantee it. Williams’s tendency to conflate empowerment with resistance can be traced back to her acceptance of Foucault’s claim that resistance is coextensive with power relations. It is not completely clear what Foucault meant by this, and it is pretty clear that his genealogies of power never made good on this conceptual point. The fine points of Foucault interpretation, however, need not concern us here; it seems to me that Foucault gets closer to the truth in his last word on the topic of power and resistance, in which he says: “there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. . . . In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty. . . . [I]n the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance.” In this passage, Foucault makes it clear that the relationship between power and resistance is ultimately grounded in his understanding of the paradox of subjectivation, outlined above. The reason that relations of power always provide for the possibility of resistance (as opposed to ensuring resistance) is that relations of power both subject individuals and enable them to be subjects who have the capacity to act. But if this is correct, then it makes more sense to talk about power relations as providing a condition of possibility for resistance rather than as guaranteeing such resistance.

Judith Butler’s analysis of power and pornography does a better job than Williams’s of highlighting this relationship between domination and empowerment. Although Butler’s conception of power emphasizes the ways in which domination and empowerment are intertwined, it does not fall prey to the conflation of empowerment with resistance, for Butler acknowledges that we might be empowered in ways that end up reinforcing our own subjection. In her view, in order for the norms and practices that enforce
gender domination to be sustained and reproduced, they must be cited by
the individuals who are subject to them. Although the fact that they must be
cited by individuals does not guarantee that the norm will be cited in a sub-
versive way, it does at least provide for the possibility of the subversion of
the norm.60

Thus, according to Butler’s view of the relationship between power and
pornography, it does not make sense to claim, as MacKinnon and Dworkin
do in the Minneapolis ordinance, that pornography itself actually is the
subordination of women; on the contrary, Butler argues, “its authority is
decidedly less divine; its power, less efficacious.”61 Here Butler’s critique is
similar to that of the feminist sex radicals: “although one might well agree
that a good deal of pornography is offensive, it does not follow that its
offensiveness consists in its putative power to construct (unilaterally,
exhaustively) the social reality of what a woman is.”62 Instead, although it is
the case that pornography compels its consumers to cite the oppressive and
subordinating sexual practices and norms that it depicts, it is the fact that
these practices and norms must be cited in order for them to be efficacious
that makes possible resistance to or subversion of them. This means that, as
Butler puts it rather cryptically, “if the text acts once, it can act again, and
possibly against its prior act.”63 In other words, although pornography can
be understood as a medium for the transmission of relations of power that
subordinate women to men, this mechanism of subordination is accom-
plished only by creating women as sexual subjects who are subjected to the
relations of domination that pornography depicts; however, the fact that
subjection is always Janus-faced means that these relations of domination
themselves provide for the possibility of resistance. So unlike the anti-
pornography feminists, who claim that consuming pornography can never
be an act of resistance to male domination, and the feminist sex radicals,
who imply that it is always an act of resistance to patriarchy, Butler suggests
the more reasonable view that the consumption of pornography may or may
not be an instance of the subversion of women’s subordination.

So Butler does a better job of distinguishing between empowerment
and resistance than either the feminist sex radicals or Williams. But what is
it that allows us to move from empowerment to resistance? This is a ques-
tion that Butler’s conception of power seems unable to answer. In Butler’s
analysis, whether or not an individual is successful in translating his/her
empowerment into resistance to a system of domination seems to be a mat-
ter of luck. Butler’s analysis of the film Paris Is Burning underscores this
point: it is entirely possible for one to attempt to subvert a relation of domi-
nation and end up unwittingly reinforcing it, or, conversely, to attempt to
uphold a relation of domination and end up unwittingly subverting it.
Thus, one of the lessons that Butler draws from the film is that it “documents
neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, but
an unstable coexistence of both.”64 But this idea that whether or not the
empowerment of a subordinated individual successfully translates into
resistance to subordination is a matter of accident seems to lock members
of oppressed groups inside an iron cage. To be precise, the problem is not
that Butler denies the agency of subordinated individuals, for her account
of the paradox of subjectivation does provide an account of how individuals are made subjects with the capacity to act in and through the domination relations to which they are subjected. It is hard, however, to avoid the feeling that action on the part of subordinated agents is not so much futile or impossible as it is absurd (and here Butler’s existentialist roots might be showing), in that its efficacy is so in doubt as to render the action itself virtually meaningless.

One could begin to address this problem by thinking through an aspect of power that Butler herself fails to recognize: namely, the power that we exercise with others in collective social and political action. Although I agree with Butler that individuals are empowered as individuals in and through the relations of domination to which they are subjected, it is also the case that individuals are empowered in and through the collective power that emerges out of oppositional social movements like the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, the gay pride movement, and new labor movements. In fact, it seems quite plausible that it is this latter element of our constitution as empowered agents that makes resistance truly possible, since it is the conceptual and normative resources that are developed in collective social movements that then become the resources on which we draw in our individual, everyday struggles to resist the forces of domination. All of which suggests that a fully adequate feminist analysis of power must be able to illuminate not just domination and resistance, but also feminist solidarity.

In conclusion, what can the feminist analysis of power just sketched tell us about pornography and the pornography debate? It seems undoubtedly true, as the feminist sex radicals argue, that it is possible to be empowered to be a sexual subject by consuming pornography. Indeed, it may even be the case that, in a culture in which pornography is taken to be an authoritative discourse about sex, even those who do not directly consume pornography are nonetheless empowered as sexual subjects by it. And yet it is nonetheless true that, given the sexist nature of much pornography, using it might (paradoxically) empower women to be subordinate subjects. Thus, it seems to be going too far to suggest, as Linda Williams does, that the consumption of pornography brings with it “greater sexual citizenship for women.”

Insofar as pornography is empowering, it is a possible site for resistance, but insofar as the genre is structured to a large extent by relations of masculine dominance and feminine subordination, it is also a possible site of the application and articulation of oppression. Finally, what might allow pornography to go from being a possible to being an actual site for resistance is precisely the resources that are generated by the collective power of feminism as a social movement. In other words, it is the conceptual and normative resources that are generated in the feminist movement that enable individual women to reinterpret pornographic texts and/or films as subversive of patriarchy and thus make it possible for them to transform the experience of performing in or consuming pornography from a humiliating experience to a liberating one.

The analysis of power sketched in the preceding pages enables us to see ourselves as sexual subjects but also makes clear that we achieve this status
in and through our subjection to cultural and social norms of sexuality, including those depicted in pornography, and in and through our identification with social collectivities, such as the feminist movement. Thus, according to this view, pornography does not have the power to construct our social reality that MacKinnon and Dworkin claim it has, nor do we as individuals have the power to decide to construe pornography as necessarily subversive. Such a transformation of the impact of pornography can be brought about, if at all, only by a collective social movement.

The view of pornography that this conception of power implies does not call into question the legal and political consensus that seems to have emerged over the regulation of pornography. It is my view that, given the importance of the First Amendment for our life in a democratic culture, the burden of proof is on antipornography feminists to argue convincingly that restriction of pornography is absolutely necessary for the full citizenship of women. In part because of the inadequacies of their conception of power, I do not think that MacKinnon and Dworkin have met this burden. But although I do not question the legal and political consensus on the pornography question, the conception of power sketched here does address in a new and, I hope, illuminating way some of the more puzzling conceptual and philosophical questions raised by the feminist pornography debate.

I am grateful to Charles Guignon, members of the Philosophy Departments at Dartmouth College and The University of Vermont, and an anonymous reviewer for the Journal of Social Philosophy for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.

Notes

1 Here I am using the term suggested by Carole Vance, one of the feminists most closely associated with the anticensorship side of the debate. Vance points out that it would be misleading to label this side as the “pro-pornography” side of the debate, since these feminists agreed that much pornography was sexist. See Vance, “More Danger, More Pleasure: A Decade after the Barnard Sexuality Conference,” in Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, 2nd ed., ed. Carole Vance (London: Pandora, 1992), xxiii.

2 Matters are different in Canada, where the Butler decision incorporated some of the ideas of the American antipornography feminists into existing Canadian obscenity law. See R. v. Butler, Supreme Court of Canada, S.C.J. no. 15, 1992.


4 For a similar approach, see Ann Ferguson, “Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminism,” Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 10, no. 1 (1984): 106–12. Although I generally agree with Ferguson’s approach, her focus is much broader than mine, encompassing each side of the debate’s conceptions of not just power but also freedom and sexuality. I find her insights into the way that power is understood in the feminist pornography debate quite suggestive; in what follows I offer a similar but more detailed consideration of power than Ferguson’s.

For this sort of approach, see Frances Ferguson, “Pornography: The Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Spring 1995): 670–95.

For this sort of approach, see Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Signet, 1986).


This should not be read as suggesting that MacKinnon and Dworkin claim that men are innately dominant and women are innately subordinate. In their view, gender and sexual categories are socially created and maintained, not natural. The commitment to the view that gender and sexuality are socially constructed, constituted, and reinforced—an aspect of MacKinnon and Dworkin’s position often overlooked or misrepresented by critics—is one assumption that the antipornography feminists and the feminist sex radicals share.


Ibid.

Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women’s Equality* (Minneapolis: Organizing against Pornography, 1988), 101. This is only the first part of the definition offered in the ordinance, which then goes on to specify nine conditions that have to be met in order for the work in question to be considered pornographic. It is this initial part of the definition, however, that raises the most interesting philosophical questions, the most important of which is, to paraphrase the former president of the United States, what is the meaning of the word *is* here? Since my focus is on the conception of power that is presupposed in MacKinnon and Dworkin’s analysis of pornography, however, and not on their definition of pornography per se, I shall set this and related questions aside. For an analysis of these definitional issues, see Melinda Vadas, “A First Look at the Pornography/Civil Rights Ordinance: Could Pornography Be the Subordination of Women?” *Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 9 (1987): 487–511; and W. A. Parent, “A Second Look at Pornography and the Subordination of Women,” *Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 4 (1990): 205–11.


On this point, see Nancy Fraser, “Beyond the Master/Subject Model,” in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).


Ibid., 244.

MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 53.


For one woman’s account of the consumption of pornography as a route to empowerment, see Sally Tisdale, “Talk Dirty to Me,” *Harpers* (February 1992): 37–46. Chancer points out a parallel tendency on the part of feminist sex radicals to explain away as false consciousness the claims of women that performing in and/or consuming pornography can be harmful and degrading; see Chancer, “Feminist Offensives.”

For an extended argument to this effect, see Harry Brod, “Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality,” *Social Theory and Practice* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 265–84.

Tisdale, “Talk Dirty to Me,” 45.


Lisa Duggan, “Sex Panics,” in Duggan and Hunter, Sex Wars, 76. Of course, referring to the antipornography feminists’ campaign in this way is highly tendentious. MacKinnon and Dworkin’s proposed ordinance made pornography civilly actionable, allowing those who believe they have been harmed by pornography to sue the producers and distributors for damages in civil court. Whether or not this kind of legislation creates a “chilling effect” that amounts to the legal suppression of sexual imagery is debatable.

They also worry that the claim that women are powerless ignores the role that some women play in the domination of others. On this point, see Ann Snitow, “Retrenchment versus Transformation: The Politics of the Anti-Pornography Movement,” in Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography, and Censorship, ed. FACT Book Committee (New York: Caught Looking, 1986), 13.


Snitow, “Retrenchment versus Transformation,” 16.

Ibid.

Lisa Duggan, “Censorship in the Name of Feminism,” in Duggan and Hunter, Sex Wars, 40.

Kate Ellis, “I’m Black and Blue from the Rolling Stones and I’m Not Sure How I Feel about It: Pornography and the Feminist Imagination,” in FACT Book Committee, Caught Looking, 44.

Lisa Duggan, “Introduction,” in Duggan and Hunter, Sex Wars, 7.

Tisdale, “Talk Dirty to Me,” 46.


Ibid.


Willis, “Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography,” 464.


Ibid., 12.

It is interesting to note that many of the feminist sex radicals cite Foucault to back up their claim that sexuality is socially constructed but fail to consider how his critique of the repressive hypothesis might undercut their analysis of pornography as a route to sexual liberation and empowerment. Rubin does discuss the repressive hypothesis and correctly notes that Foucault does not argue that sexual repression is totally non-existent, but she fails to take seriously the ways in which her own radical politics of sexuality would have to be rethought in light of Foucault’s account of the interplay between the productive and repressive functions of power.

Of course, the aim of the feminist sex radicals was precisely to start a conversation about the role of both pleasure and danger in women’s experience of sexuality. Although I think the feminist sex radicals deserve a lot of credit for starting such a conversation, if we are to continue the conversation, we will have to rethink the conceptions of empowerment and liberation that they presuppose.

Because of limited space, I cannot do more than sketch an alternative conception of power here. Many of the suggestions that follow are explored in more detail in Amy,


53 Ibid., 56.

54 Ibid., 57.

55 Ibid., 170.

56 Ibid., 174.


60 See Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, chap. 4, for a discussion of this point.


62 Ibid., 67–68.

63 Ibid., 69.

64 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 137.

65 Williams, *Hard Core*, 274.