

Can Porn Set Us Free?

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In *Growth Fetish* I argue that it has become apparent that the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies – the sexual revolution, the counter-culture, the women's movement and the civil rights movement – have had some unforeseen and regrettable consequences. Contrary to the dreams of the young people of that era, the liberation movements did not create a society of free individuals in which each of us, released from the shackles of social conservatism, could find our true selves. While the goals were noble, the effect has been to open up to the marketers areas of social life from which the forces of commerce had previously been excluded. In a strong sense, the liberation movements of that era did the ground work for the neoliberal economic revolution of the eighties and nineties.

It seems to me that the libertarian-left continues to invest so much in the freedoms won in the sixties and seventies that it has lost its capacity for discernment, an ability to recognise the social limits of individual freedoms. The ideas of the libertarian-left have become a reactionary force, for they have substituted an uncritical defence of the freedoms won in an earlier era for a real politics of social change.

I'd like to develop this argument with respect to the perennial question of sex, and in particular the commodification of sexuality and what I call the pornographication of everyday life. This is a fitting topic for this Writers Festival not least because one of the overseas literary stars is Catherine Millet, author of the best-selling memoir *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* Millet's memoir is one of a number of recent literary works that, one way or another, tell us a great deal about the bleakness of life in post-modern consumer capitalism and the political impotence of the libertarian left.

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I wrote *Growth Fetish* to understand one monolithic fact. I call it the great contradiction of modern life, and it is this. Decades of sustained economic growth have meant that most people in the West live lives of abundance. This abundance has occurred at a time when the social constraints of class, gender and race have in large measure been swept away. We are richer and freer than humans have ever been, but – and here is the contradiction – we are no happier. For decades we have been promised that economic growth and the lifting of oppressive laws and institutions would take away the sources of our discontent. But it hasn't happened. What is going on? I want to venture an answer to this by way of an examination of the commodification of sex, and will include a commentary on the reaction to a report my Institute recently published on the question of youth and pornography.

As criticism of the libertarian-left has come almost exclusively from moral conservatives, it will help if I establish my bona fides as a card-carrying member of the protest generation. Like many others of my age group I participated in the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. I marched against the Vietnam War and was arrested for obstructing traffic. I camped outside the South African Embassy in the dead of a Canberra winter to protest against the Springbok rugby tour. I was manhandled by police when I linked arms with others to form a human barricade around the first Aboriginal tent embassy.

From my mid-teens I was convinced that the lifting of the suffocating constraints on sexual expression would be a source of liberation. We railed against 'Victorian morality' and were attracted to free love (most of us preferred the idea to the practice). When the headmaster of my school gathered the sixth form into the school hall and told us we should confine our selves to 'waist-up relationships' I made him squirm by asking defiantly: "What can a 60-year old man tell 17-year olds about sex?" With others I rejoiced at the liberalisation of censorship laws that allowed anyone to read *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Schoolkids Oz*. I even took my clothes off at Jim Cairns' Down to Earth hippie festival at Bredbo in 1974, but that's an episode I would prefer to forget.

Like young people everywhere I thought we were freeing ourselves from the shackles of oppressive convention and sexual hang-ups. We thought we were creating a new society and we knew our opponents were being defeated. The conservative

establishment lost cause after cause and could no longer sustain the institutions of Victorian morality, women's oppression, racism and the unbearable constraints of social convention. But while the battle against social conservatism was being fought and won, the real enemy was getting on with business and savouring the new commercial opportunities that the radicals were opening up.

But I am jumping ahead of myself, so let me go back a little.

Oppression and liberation

The liberation movements were a natural evolution as they expressed no more than the democratic impulse that had driven the history of the West for the previous three or four centuries. From this viewpoint, the late 20th century moral decline bemoaned by the conservatives is no more than a period of transition, in which the traditional expectations and roles that defined industrial capitalism are disintegrating and something new is emerging. The rejection of traditional standards, expectations and stereotypes represented by the various trends and movements dating from the 1960s – the sexual revolution, the counter-culture that led to experiments like Nimbin, and the women's movement – was a manifestation of the longing for self-determination.

Democracy, combined with the arrival of widespread material abundance in the West, has for the first time provided the opportunity for the mass of ordinary people to pursue self-realisation. The political demand for democracy of earlier generations has become a personal demand for freedom to find one's own path, to 'write one's own biography'. The constraints of socially imposed roles have weakened, oppression based on gender and race is no longer tenable, and the daily struggle for survival has for most people disappeared. All across the industrialised world bewildered people have been asking, 'What do we do now?' Or, as the ethicist Peter Singer has put it, 'How should I live?'. For if the life-determining constraints of class, gender and race have by and large fallen away, and the threat of poverty has for most been dissolved by decades of economic growth, the ordinary individual has, for the first time in history, a true choice.

The democratic impulse – which to date has taken the form of collective struggles to be free of autocrats and various forms of social oppression – has morphed into something else, a search for authentic identity, for self-actualisation, for the

achievement of true individuality. Some have gone straight to the known sources in various spiritual traditions or, more often, the superficial versions of them in various New Age guises. But most have ended up seeking a proxy identity in the form of commodity consumption, consumer capitalism's answer to meaninglessness.

Others have looked for the answer in drugs. People continue to pursue more wealth and consume at ever-higher levels because they do not know how better to answer the question 'What do I do now?'. The agents of the marketing society have seized on the primal search for authentic identity to sell more gym shoes, cars, mobile phones and home furnishings.

And what happens at the level of the individual translates into society's preoccupation with economic growth, an autistic behavioural pattern of obsessive acquisitiveness devoid of emotional connection with other humans, a pattern reinforced daily by the platitudes of the commentators and the politicians. But this state of affairs can be sustained for only so long. Despite its extraordinary success over the last four or five decades, we are beginning to see that the marketing project must ultimately fail: in the last instance, a pair of designer jeans cannot satisfy the deeper urge to make sense of a life.

In the marketing society, power and oppression are no longer concerned predominantly with the domination of one group by another but are bound up with what people do to themselves. For most citizens, the fruits of growth have provided the means to seize emancipation, yet few have availed themselves of the opportunity, except to abandon themselves to a life of serial gratification. As I will explain, this irony is perhaps most stark in the success of the women's movement, where progress towards liberation was diverted into equality in work and consumption.

While power, oppression and resistance were in an earlier era played out in the arena of production, now they are played out in the arena of consumption and the wider polity. Industrial struggles still occur, but they are rarely life-or-death struggles. To be sure, certain groups in society are disparaged and victimised – the homeless, the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, indigenous people – but the system has no structural interest in this sort of oppression, except perhaps a fiscal one.

For most workers, the modern economy and labour market provide some degree of

autonomy that makes them much less subject to the dictates of the boss than they were in the past. This is more the case for some types of workers than for others, and it holds even in the face of attempts to remove protections in labour laws. In the West wage slavery belongs to another era. But if oppression is the opposite of liberation, and liberation means a life in which each person can live out their full potential and achieve true autonomy, we remain oppressed.

Such a view is, of course, alien to the enlightened advocate of neoliberalism – after all, haven't modern social movements swept away all the oppressions of the past? The sexual revolution freed us from our Victorian inhibitions; the women's movement freed women from role stereotyping; gay liberation allowed free expression of sexual preference; and the civil rights movement eliminated institutionalised racism. Conservatives fulminated and progressive people celebrated.

Liberating capitalism

But despite the gains, the social movements of the post-war period have for the most part represented no threat to consumer capitalism. Indeed, the counter-culture, the civil rights movement and the women's movement have served to reinvigorate it. Post-war rebellions against oppression have worked in the interests of consumer capitalism because they have swept away long-standing cultural and religious barriers to the most insidious form of oppression. This is the oppression implicit in sublimation of the self in pursuit of wealth, fame and social success, a form of oppression that is readily embraced. As I argue at length in *Growth Fetish*, liberation is denied those who invest their lives in external reward.

This is not just a matter of personal choice: capitalism conspires to ensure that external rewards will triumph over the urge to liberation. In a famous passage on the conquering power of capitalism, Marx declared:

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Marx's declaration was in some respects premature, since preindustrial social conventions and conservative attitudes continued to impose constraints on the full manifestation of market capitalism for a century after publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. It is now becoming clear that the sixties generation tilled the ground for the neoliberal reforms and 'turbo-capitalism' of the 1980s and 1990s.

Railing against the conventions of their parents, the counter-culture tore down the social structures of conservatism that, for all their stultifying oppressiveness, held the market in check. The demands for freedom in private life, for freedom from the fetters of career and family, and for freedom of sexual expression were noble in themselves, but it is now evident that demolition of the customary social structures did not create a society of free individuals. Instead, it created an opportunity for the marketers to substitute material consumption and manufactured lifestyles for the influences of social tradition.

In the face of revolutionary changes in social attitudes in the West, consumer capitalism has remained unruffled. Indeed, each new social revolution has provided an opportunity for the system to rejuvenate itself. Both the counter-culture and environmentalism contained within them seeds of revolt, but they were effortlessly co-opted, so that now those who are inclined can simply buy an alternative lifestyle, whether it be the image of urban escapee to be had from a 4WD, the rugged nature lover to be acquired at Kathmandu or the badass ghetto youth conferred by being seen to listen to hip-hop.

The women's movement attacked the social and family conventions that kept women in the kitchen. The family built around the male breadwinner undoubtedly denied women the opportunity to spread their wings, but it also conditioned the labour market to operate on the assumption that workers had family responsibilities. Men formed trade unions to fight for limits on working hours, security of employment, and carefully regulated pay structures. When workers demanded a 'living wage' that could sustain a married man and his wife and children, the moral argument had wide appeal.

This world of security in which people knew their roles as well as their social responsibilities has gone. The counter-culture took the hatchet to it long before the ideologues of the free market decided that we could all be richer if the labour market

were deregulated. The counter-culture had its wish. Gone are the stuffy constraints of career expectations, nine-to-five regimentation and the life mapped out by the corporation's hierarchy. Now workers are free-floating commodities in the labour market, often employed casually or on contract, the only consideration being their measurable contribution to the firm's productivity.

So Margaret Thatcher should be thankful to beat poet Alan Ginsberg and LSD guru Timothy Leary. The counter-culture tuned in, turned on and dropped out, but only long enough to sweep aside the social conventions that had provided moral constraint on the urgings of consumer capitalism.

It is fitting that Germaine Greer – the original voice of anarcho-feminism – should now shatter the dream of liberal feminism in her book *The Whole Woman*.² For all the advances in education and employment and for all the dramatic changes in attitudes, women have now become paid-up members of the market system. They have achieved equality so that they can feel alienated and exploited in the way men do. They sought liberation but settled for equality. Women, she argues, can never be liberated until men are too, and neither can be free when they are active and willing participants in consumer culture.

In the 1950s middle-class respectability may have been oppressive but it carried with it a certain deference. Women are the subject of far more sexual objectification now than they were in the 1950s, although men have become more adept at concealing it. And even the need to conceal has been discarded by the crass exploitation of 'girl power'. Why should a young man pretend that he doesn't lust after the young woman who has just burned him off at the traffic lights, when nubile popstars thrust their groins at the camera and declare 'more power to us'?

As happened with the counter-culture of the 1960s, mainstream feminism has been co-opted. Greer observes, 'What none of us noticed was that the ideal of liberation was fading out with the word'. The liberation of women from oppression was understood by the early feminists as freedom, not only from oppressive male structures, but also from internalisation of self-hatred and self-denigration. Algerian anti-colonialist author Franz Fanon and South African black consciousness activist

² Although similar critiques of liberal feminism had been made by other feminists.

Steve Biko understood that oppression runs deep: while discriminatory laws can be changed, the internalisation of oppression is far more insidious. Colonialism was threatened by liberation struggles, patriarchy by feminism, and segregation by the civil rights movement. But what sort of people would be left by liberation?

Gender equality has meant, above all, unfettered opportunity for women to create themselves in the images invented for them by the marketers. Whether a woman is a dutiful housewife or a kick-arse careerist is a matter of indifference to the marketers, as long as she continues to spend. There is no difference between an advertising campaign that appeals to the image of the nurturing, caring mother and one that targets the power-dressed professional; indeed, the cleverer campaigns manage to combine both. Each is just a demographic; the only difference is that the independent professional believes she is more in control of her life when she is deciding what to buy. Greer has a cruel term for it – lifestyle feminism’:

... the kind of feminism that sees getting membership of the MCC or the Garrick Club as a triumph is lifestyle feminism that gives tacit support to a system that oppresses women worldwide. A ‘new feminism’ that celebrates the right ... to be pretty in an array of floaty dresses and little suits put together for starvation wages by adolescent girls in Asian sweat-shops is no feminism at all.

Equality is good for the market. It has meant a growing and better qualified workforce; it has destroyed old-fashioned ideas that employers need to pay enough to support a family; it has helped turn nurturing households into nodes of consumption; it has hastened the development of lifestyle thinking; and it has exposed a much larger proportion of the population to the direct influence of the advertisers. In addition to Alan Ginsberg and Timothy Leary, Mrs Thatcher has much to thank liberal feminism for.

The pornography debate

In recent times some niggling doubts about where this has all led have become crystallised in my mind as a result of a report my Institute published in March on the question of youth exposure to pornography.³ The report revealed that teenagers in

³ Michael Flood and Clive Hamilton, *Youth and Pornography in Australia: Evidence on the extent of exposure and likely effects*, Discussion Paper Number 52, The Australia Institute, 2003

Australia have extensive exposure to both X-rated videos and sex sites on the internet. We emphasized that the extraordinary proliferation of sex sites on the internet means that it is no longer feasible to hang on to the comforting belief that pornography for kids is not much more than boys sneaking a look at Dad's *Playboy* centrefold.

Our report was especially focussed on what we called 'violent and extreme' pornography on the internet, especially those practices that would never be permissible on an X-rated video. We concluded that much more effective measures are needed to restrict access to violent and extreme pornography on the internet. However, while we have criticisms of the representation of sex in X-rated videos, we did not believe that any changes are needed in their regulation.

Our report included a content analysis of X-rated videos and internet sex sites drawing on a range of other studies and our own research. In summary, pornography's characteristic codes of representation reflect its appeal to a male heterosexual audience. The camera is positioned to facilitate maximum visibility of the female body and genitals. Men's bodies are not presented, scrutinised or routinely objectified in the same way, except of course in gay male pornography. Pornographic imagery focuses relentlessly on acts of penetration and on vaginal and anal intercourse and fellatio. Male-centered constructions of sex are also visible in the contrasting treatment of cunnilingus and fellatio in adult videos: scenes of the former are short and show unresponsive men, while scenes of fellatio are prolonged and show women who appear highly sexually aroused.

Two sexual practices – extravaginal ejaculation and anal intercourse – have become staples in heterosexual pornography. It is standard practice in heterosexual pornography for the male partner to withdraw from intercourse or fellatio before orgasm to ejaculate on to the body or face of his female partner. Images of male ejaculation are commonly described as 'cumshots', while the sub-genre 'facials' refers to images of men ejaculating on to women's faces and women's faces covered in semen. Male-female anal intercourse is a second, almost mandatory, inclusion in pornographic depictions of heterosexual sex.

You don't have to watch much mass-marketed heterosexual pornography to realise the accuracy of the observation of US pornography researchers Jensen and Dines:

sex is divorced from intimacy, loving affection, and human connection; all women are constantly available for sex and have insatiable sexual appetites; and all women are sexually satisfied by whatever the men in the film do.⁴

This description of video porn fits precisely the accounts of her sexual encounters described by Catherine Millet in her memoir. Millet provides graphic accounts of dozens of sexual liaisons, especially orgies in which she is penetrated in every orifice by long queues of men, in apartments, parks and cars. The anonymity and arbitrariness of sexual partners (she concedes she cannot remember most of them and did not even see many) celebrates sex as an activity devoid of personal contact, and she writes of herself as if she were always available and virtually insatiable, exactly as women are portrayed in porn videos. It is not the copiousness or explicitness of the sex in the memoir that makes it pornographic but the studied absence of intimacy and affection in the sex that fills the pages. She dares us to judge her and, fearful of mockery, few have taken up the challenge.

Perhaps the emblematic statement in Millet's memoir is this one: "Fucking is an antidote to boredom. I find it easier to give my body than my heart." While one can easily interpret Millet's extraordinary sexual abandon as the result her own upbringing and character, the success of the book tells us something profound about the nature of sexual relations under late consumer capitalism.

As I watch Catherine Millet at this Writers' Festival I wonder whether I am seeing a real human being or only the shadow of one. In her *Sexual History* she has so completely exposed all that is intimate and personal about herself that there seems to be nothing left. For there is a sense in which our private selves are inextricably entwined with our sexual intimacy, and Millet has given it all away – or rather, she has sold it in exchange for celebrity and money. But in the hollowing out of herself Millet has done a service; she has shown us the desperate emptiness that, taken to the extreme, the objectification of sex and sexuality leaves in its wake. That, I think, is the legacy of the sexual revolution.

⁴ Jensen, R. and Dines, G. 1998, The content of mass-marketed pornography. In Gail Dines, Robert Jensen, and Ann Russo. (eds). *Pornography: The Production and Consumption of Inequality* (pp. 65-100). New York: Routledge, p. 72

If Millet's book were presented as nothing more than an unusually explicit erotic tale then I would have no argument with it. That, after all, is why it has sold so well, although I am sure many readers, like me, soon became bored with it. But Millet and her publishers have sold it to us as a powerful text of social critique.

Millet set out to subvert convention. Yet writing explicitly about sex is no longer a revolutionary act; erotic imagery is ubiquitous and no boundary remains untraversed. So what is Millet subverting, other than love and intimacy themselves? Strong relationships may be thought of as those in which each party gives the other unbounded freedom but neither wants to exploit it. Millet's libertarianism is still stuck in the adolescent phase in which the freedoms have been won but the maturity not to exploit them has yet to develop.

The claimed literary value of Millet's memoir has rescued it from being shelved in the pornography section of the bookshops. But the nakedness of her exposure is at the memoir's core. It's not art, it's suicide. The mood that swirls like a mist around her life history is one of ineffable sadness, and this is the sadness that engulfs us when we reflect on the failure of the liberation movements to usher in a new world.

The publisher describes Catherine Millet's *Sexual Life* as "a manifesto of our times – when the sexual equality of women is a reality and where love and sex have gone their own separate ways". Is this not precisely what men, in their raw state, have always wanted, to divorce copulation from intimacy? Is not every counsellor's room the witness to an endless stream of torn relationships in which she wants more intimacy and he wants more penetration? In the world of Catherine Millet women have entered the universe of sex constructed by men – primordial, unsocialised men driven by their ids, in which all finer feelings are drowned in a sea of testosterone.

This is the new 'democracy of pleasure', in the words of Ovidie, the French porn star and author who describes herself as a feminist, artist and philosopher.⁵ Ovidie starred in the mainstream film *The Pornographer* of which one critic said that 'no film in the history of cinema had portrayed oral sex with such a superb sense of existential

⁵ Andrew Hussey, 'The democracy of the sex shop', AFR 27 September 2002 (originally published in New Statesman).

weariness and melancholy'.⁶ The subtext of all porn is boredom, the mechanisation of sex stripped of its excitement and mystery, reduced to that which one person does to another (or more precisely, what men do to women). Sex in porn is not the exploration of one with another but an act of relief, like defecation (indeed, on some internet sites the two are combined).

Perhaps we could accept it if this attitude were confined to porn videos and sex sites on the net. But depersonalised, indiscriminate sex has crept into the cultural mainstream so that the symbols, styles and even personnel of the pornographic genre are cropping up in television, newspapers and film. Porn stars run for parliament with the aim of asserting porn's acceptance and we treat it as a light-hearted relief from the usual dull political fare. (Was anyone like me, surprised to discover that Jamie Parker, the Greens candidate for a Sydney electorate, was responsible in his other job in a marketing company for a huge billboard showing a man and a woman having sex to advertise Horny Goat Weed, a natural aphrodisiac?) Even Telstra bought into a company making porn videos, a move which led one ethical investment fund to dispose of its Telstra shares.

Along with Millet's memoir and Ovidie's book, the novels of Michel Houellebecq are a basic ingredient of the turmoil of sexual politics that has gripped France and is rippling across other Western cultures. Both *Atomised* and *Platform* have been called pornographic. There is plenty of sex, with one reviewer describing them as 'wilfully obscene'. *Platform* is described quaintly by another as 'filthy'. But unlike Millet's memoir, the eroticism is there for a purpose.

For Houellebecq's characters the sex is an antidote to the meaninglessness of modern life but the novels are also a meditation on that meaninglessness. They are a subtle journey into the vain quest for happiness in a post-scarcity world in which the promises of plenty, and the freedoms won in the sixties and seventies, have left a new barrenness. If all has failed us and there is nothing left to believe in, then why not fuck till we drop? Whereas Millet puts her orifices on display, Houellebecq shows us his doubts. While Millet is still playing out the fantasies of sexual freedom,

⁶ As reported by Andrew Hussey, 'Liberte, fraternite, pornographie', The Weekend Australian February 22-23 2003. (Check original)

Houellebecq is warning us of its perils. ‘The sexual revolution was to destroy the last unit separating the individual from the market.’⁷

The ‘sexual communism’ promoted by left-libertarians and the porn industry is of course strongly in the interests of the market. This is true in the obvious sense that pornography is one of the world’s biggest industries. It is estimated that hardcore porn in the form of videos, the internet, live sex shows and cable television now generates revenues of \$10 billion per annum, as much as Hollywood’s US film takings.⁸ But more insidiously, the values and lifestyles promoted by Millet and the left-libertarian defenders of porn are precisely those of the market. Discernment and restraint are antithetical to consumerism. Depersonalised sex and the spread of the pornographic style are intensely self-centred, just as the market desires. They express and celebrate an understanding of happiness that seeks instantaneous emotional and physical highs – whether obtained through drugs, spectacles, food, gambling or sex – where each of these is a commodity. Twentieth-century consumer capitalism has seen a progressive substitution of activities and desires that result in immediate gratification in place of the more challenging and fulfilling demands of trying to live a worthwhile life.

There is nothing wrong with indulging in sex, drugs, food and spectacles, except when they become the markers by which people chart a course through life. There is a trade-off that must be made between a life devoted to short-term gratification and one aimed at attaining deeper goals of self-realisation. After all, isn’t making that transition what growing up is about? Yet instant gratification is the sort of happiness that the market wants because this is the only sort of happiness that markets can provide.

Perhaps there is a place for purely objectified sex, divorced from human passions other than lust, but when this view of sexual relationships pervades social understanding and the intimate behaviour of generations of men and women then we have lost something fundamental to our humanity.

Freud used to complain that his American acolytes had interpreted his psychotherapeutic ideas as a technique for making people happy. Steeped in the

⁷ *Atomised*, p. 136

⁸ *Guardian Weekly*, May 8-14 2003, p. 14

European philosophical tradition, Freud believed this to be a trivialisation of a movement whose purpose was to understand the meaning of what people do and the nature of the human condition. The purpose of life is not to be happy; it is to understand ourselves and become reconciled with that knowledge. While Houellebecq's novels are an exploration of the deeper questions of the human condition, Millet's unexamined sexual abandon is wholly consistent with how US corporations have defined the pursuit of happiness. The same can be said of the libertarian defenders of porn in Australia.

Defending porn

The reaction to The Australia Institute's report on youth and pornography reflected all of the immaturity of left-libertarianism. While the subject matter of the report is of course highly emotive, the issues were dealt with in a scholarly way and the authors – Dr Michael Flood and myself – have strong credentials for liberal-mindedness. The principal author, Michael Flood, has for some years taught gender studies at the ANU and has long experience as a sex educator in schools. While I don't have the track record of work in this area, I certainly did not come to the task as a stuffed shirt. (I have the dubious distinction of being the first Australian to say 'fuck' on national television.)

But we quickly discovered that there is an unholy alliance working against any consideration of the dangers of porn and, by implication, any extension of restrictions on it. The alliance includes the adult video industry, the internet industry and a small but highly vocal group of libertarians and academic sexologists. The latter group are of most interest. These left-libertarians still see porn as a political statement, a symbol of the freedoms won in the sixties and later of the 'right' of women to engage in any form of sexual expression. Porn is just one manifestation of the democracy of sexual expression and the more outrageous the sexual act the stronger the political statement. Of course, the adult industry laps up this adolescent form of liberation politics and maintains, in the face of scepticism, that women are keen consumers of porn too, and would be freed to enjoy it as much as men if only the remnants of social conservatism were blown away. In Australia, academics such as Catherine Lumby and Kath Albury are doing the blowing.

The first to attack our report was Kath Albury, a media academic at the University of Sydney, who was disturbed at “the veiled condemnation of non-heterosexual activities and the lack of respect for young adults’ sexuality”.⁹ In fact the report went out of its way to acknowledge the important role of sexual imagery for the development of young people’s sexuality, especially young gay people. Albury’s defence of pornography is to acknowledge reluctantly that there may be grounds for discomfort with some forms of porn, but then in a trice to slide away from it and refuse to address it head on. In their writing about porn, Albury and other post-moderns adopt a particular pose: sex is playful, women are ‘girls’ and judgements are for those with hang-ups. Sex takes all forms and no-one has the right to judge one form as more worthy than another; everyone has their own tastes in sex just as they do in clothes, so lighten up.

But for all of the post-modern irony and determination to ‘transgress’ remaining norms, Albury declines to engage with the single burning question: Does she or does she not believe that it is OK for a 14-year old to look at images of a woman being raped, a man penetrating a cow and a woman defecating into the mouth of another? For these are the images that are easy for the curious teenager to find on the internet. And to argue that sexual preferences are changing so that acts that were beyond the pale 20 years ago are now accepted, is just a debating trick. Is she saying that one day anything we can now imagine will be acceptable, and those who hesitate only hold back progress? Does that go for (name your favourite internet perversion).

Albury’s co-worker, Catherine Lumby, also leapt into print using the same technique of wry light-heartedness, the purpose of which is to say: ‘Look I’m cool about sex and anyone who raises concerns about porn should just lighten up and get with the times’. Unlike Albury who claimed she was not shocked by our report, Lumby wrote in *The Bulletin* that she was shocked at our claims that images of rape and bestiality are common on the net. One has to ask how an academic who researches porn can be so naïve, but this is where the libertarians’ practiced denial kicks in. Like other ultra-libertarians, Lumby is so enamoured with the liberating possibilities of porn that she refuses to recognise its dark side. Thus Lumby can argue that we made “an

⁹ Kath Albury, ‘Curious teenagers need to be informed about sex, not controlled’, Sydney Morning Herald, March 4, 2003.

unsubstantiated leap between what you can find on the internet if you actively go looking for things like bestiality, and what teenagers actively enjoy looking at”.¹⁰

This is an astonishing statement. Does she believe that teenagers will only look at what they ‘enjoy’ looking at? The rosy view of porn cannot admit that some young people, like adults, experience intense and confusing emotions around sex and go searching for things they know are taboo and may disgust and disturb them. Teenage curiosity is enough to ensure that. We don’t enjoy looking at gory car crashes but we can’t help ourselves as we drive past. Some people go out of their way to witness blood and guts. And what do we do with the boys who simply ‘enjoy’ looking at bestiality and rape sites? Do we respect their right to their own forms of sexual expression? Are we not concerned if some boys view rape and bestiality as a simple pleasure?

Lumby compares abhorrent material on the internet with “some pretty horrible stuff written about women on the backs of toilet doors”. We collectively condemn ‘horrible stuff’ written about women on toilet doors and take steps to remove it, so how its existence can be used as a reason to do nothing about the more disturbing aspects of porn is a mystery, especially when the emotional impact of graphic images of rape, for example, on the internet is much greater than any words on a toilet door.¹¹

When the problem has to be admitted, Lumby and fellow libertarians refuse to acknowledge it as a social issue and put the responsibility onto parents. The answer is an embarrassing conversations with our kids. For Lumby, parents, like porn itself, are treated as an abstraction. Parents are wise and loving and awkward around sex. Oh to be the proverbial fly on the wall when Catherine Lumby has to explain to her 12-year old the picture that has just popped up on her computer screen: “Well, dear, when a woman and a dog love each other very, very much ...”

Albury and Lumby, along with Brisbane academic Alan McKee, frequently base their credentials to comment on their participation in a major study of pornography that

¹⁰ *The Bulletin*, March 18 2003

¹¹ The queen of this libertarian foolishness is *The Australian*’s resident wit Emma Tom, whose relentless post-modern irony only displays a complete disconnection with the real world. She complains that she never receives any unsolicited porn and believes that getting hold of ‘anything more than standard newsagency tits’n’arse requires going right out of your way’. For her internet porn is about ‘massive hooters’. Very droll.

they are undertaking with the support of an ARC grant. Yet they resolutely refuse to consider the potential harms of internet porn. The tone of their commentaries is precisely that used by the adult video industry – porn is for consenting adults at play, porn is what the adventurous use when they want to spice up their sex lives. It can be that; but it can be much more as well. You can see why any discussion of depictions of sexualised violence or extreme fetishes is avoided or deflected. It is too threatening to their worldview to look at these things in the face. A common attitude to porn is not the only thing shared by these academics and the adult video industry. In a recent issue of *Eros*, the glossy magazine of the adult industry, their ARC project is described glowingly and *Eros* encourages its members to give the researchers every support.

Similar observations might be made about the ABC's *Media Watch* program fronted by vocal ultra-libertarian David Marr. Marr seems to have been outraged at the prominence given in the *Sydney Morning Herald* to our report on youth and pornography and, by way of a series of phone calls and emails between myself and his researcher, sought to find some media malpractice in the report or the reporting of it. None could be found, but that did not prevent Marr making a series of innuendos designed to suggest that our report and the *Herald's* story had some hidden conservative motive. As a long-time fan of *Media Watch*, this for me was a great disappointment.

The ultra-libertarians, including Millet, Lumby, Albury and Marr, are so determined to defend their sexual liberty that they have abandoned their critical faculties. The defense of pornography and the commodification of sex that goes with it is driven by an atavistic desire to hang on to freedoms won long ago and nowhere under serious threat. This form of libertarianism is not embedded in any politics or social analysis. The emotion underpinning it is the same one that underpins neoliberal economics. It is a declaration of individualism in which the purpose of life is to maximise the number and intensity of pleasurable episodes. Just as neoliberal economists find it hard to concede that there may be 'externalities' associated with their economic rationalist policies, ultra-libertarians resist any suggestion that there may be social damage arising from unfettered access to any sort of sexual practice or sexual image, even for children.

In a sense, *Growth Fetish* is a book about the morality of the market. Neoliberal economics is justified by the idea of consumer sovereignty – the belief that only consumers are in a position to decide what is in their own best interests. For the libertarians, sexual morality can similarly be reduced to a simple rule of consent. Just as we need to build a new sexual ethics, in *Growth Fetish* I argue that only in a post-growth society can we resolve the burning question of our age: ‘How can the longing for self-determination be brought into harmony with the equally important longing for shared community?’¹² One thing is for sure: the answer to this question cannot be found in the shopping malls and it cannot be found in indiscriminate sex.

¹² Posed by Ulrich Beck, *Democracy Without Enemies*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 7