

Reader Commentary: Sex and SU

RE: The pulling of Playboy, Playgirl, and Penthouse from the SU Bookstore and a subsequent letter on the ban by Siobhan Avery, Gateway's Letters to the Editor, Oct. 12, 1983.

After waiting in vain for someone else to respond to a recent letter to Gateway, I am writing to voice my own protest. Though triggered specifically by Ms. Avery's remarks, it is not meant to be a personal attack on her; my concern are certain widespread attitudes that she represents.

I submit that the open and accepting sexuality of magazines like Playboy and Playgirl is perfectly healthy and good; it is in no way degrading to anyone. That it seems so to many in this culture is primarily the result of being conditioned and indoctrinated, from their earliest years, to feel shame at exposure to nudity and sex.

Documentation of this fact could fill a book; but for one illuminating contrast, scan through the multitude of women's magazines and notice all the pictures of babies, and of women adoring babies. Shall we say these media represent babies as being mere objects for women's pleasure? It is a testimony to the power of that early training that, of all the ways in which humans naturally get pleasure from one another, only certain sexual ones are seen as inherently selfish and "dehumanizing".

As my last point implies, failure to realize the actual sources of sex-negative attitudes has led to a variety of rationalizations of those beliefs. For one thing, there have been a lot of irresponsible claims that pornography in itself has harmful social effects, notably inciting negative feelings toward and even violence against women. I submit that such views are motivated by ideology rather than good evidence. Though this is another topic requiring a lengthy analysis, from the extensive literature on the subject it is clear that no such claim is justified. Indeed, there is even some evidence that Playboy type pornography reduces hostile feelings toward women.

It is also true that there are indications that violent pornography can produce attitudes and behaviour of the type in question. Such is hardly surprising, however, given the similar evidence regarding violent media in general. In light of this, it is worth noting that the SU officers had magazines devoted to pleasure removed from SUB while

sponsoring showing of the movie A Clockwork Orange which is one long litany of senseless violence (but almost no sex). This reflects their socialization particularly well, in a society where children are allowed to see large amounts of violence (even in Disney movies) but are assiduously shielded from sex.

The most outrageous rationalization of the anti-pornography forces, in my estimation, involves the attitude that certain male sexual feelings are by nature sexist, opposed to the ideal of equal rights and dignity for both sexes. The claim is not only false; the irony is that it is itself a viciously sexist belief. As part of their biological nature, males tend to have powerful visual attractions toward female bodies and sex organs. (That it is not culturally produced is clear from clinical work with hormones,

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cross-cultural comparisons, studies of young children and of other primates, and so on). By contrast, female attraction to males is (on average) geared more to their behaviour - hence the very different emphasis of the popular women's romance novels and magazines. Interestingly enough, though, many women's sexual feelings are remarkably complementary to the male ones: exposing their bodies to the admiration of males is by far the most common theme in collections of female sex fantasies.

In any case the point is this: the attack on males' sexual desires and their expression in the media is sexism directed against males. What is the core of sexism, racism, and other hateful "...isms", after all? It lies in saying "You're different from me, therefore, you are evil or inferior." Or, as in this case, "My needs are noble, but yours are vile": whether the despised difference is physical, physiological, or psychological surely makes no moral difference.

Most of us are taught sexual guilt as children, but it tends to fall especially heavily on males. From his earliest years, a male child in this culture is told, in a multitude of ways, that his feelings toward females' bodies are evil. Being degraded in this way is naturally resisted, with a variety of ego-defence mechanisms: everything from reaction formation to the attitude that females' opinions don't count anyway. And in a vulnerable few, they take the form of deep-laid desires for revenge, or projections of guilt, upon the perceived source of the pain. This, I suggest, is a primary cause of those cases of sexual fantasy and pornography which genuinely are vicious and degrading, about which there is currently so much alarm. The guilt-by-association attempts to link that genre with ordinary pornography, I suggest, will only feed the very fires it aims to quench.

One final point. Ms. Avery believes that there is something especially wrong about an institution of higher learning promoting pornography. Here again, I maintain that the truth is precisely the opposite. One of the most basic purposes of a university is to combat irrational belief, in all its forms; and sex is one of the things this society is most irrational about. The response to pornography discussed here is just one manifestation of this: instead of "I've been socialized to feel disgust and shame at such sights", it's "that is degrading and disgusting." That blind conditioning should be allowed to pass for genuine knowledge at an institution like this is to me unconscionable. With its capacity to counteract the original aversive conditioning (a capacity utilized to much good effect by sex therapists), together with its tacit message that sex is not evil after all, pornography has had and continues to have a crucial role to play, in undoing attitudes that are not only false but productive of great harm.

What about evils like racism and (genuine) sexism, then - should they also be allowed unfettered expression on campus? My own strong inclination is to reply that they should not. But seeing once again how stupidly the censor's power tends to be used once it is acquired, I have a few doubts even there.

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