

unruly and unpredictable responses to all but the most sanitized sexual imagery. Ironically, in a culture where it was increasingly costly for feminists to present erotic images or speak in an erotic language, only the anti-pornography movement could publicly revel in the most graphic sexual images and lurid sexual language, all acceptable because their purpose was condemnation. What was needed – a complex and nuanced discussion of sexuality – was reduced to a critique of pornography, as if all of women's experience could be found there, or as if female viewers even agreed about the meaning of what they saw.⁸ The fantasy that violence against women is located or originates in objectionable sex magazines or videos rather than being part of the deep cell structure of every institution in our culture struck some feminists as hopelessly naive and wrong, as did the suggestion that the excision of the sexually explicit would solve the problem.

Alarmed by all the ways in which the feminist agenda on sexuality had been constricted, the planners of the Barnard conference decided to re-focus on what seemed to be the central question, even paradox: how could feminism at the time reduce the sexual danger women faced and expand their sexual pleasure, without sacrificing women's accounts of either one? How could we formulate and work on a shared vision that acknowledged and made space for diversity? In the face of a right-wing program of shame and punishment, how could we identify the ways in which women had been humiliated through sex, without affirming that sexuality was intrinsically humiliating? And most of all, how could we support the continuing evolution of a sexual conversation, language, and analysis beyond these initial, tentative steps? Planned by a diverse group of 29 feminists – activists, writers, academics – who came together as virtual strangers and met for almost one year in intense study-group discussions, the conference was marked by the group's commitment to exploration. The free-flowing conversations, challenging, passionately engaged, always surprising, often moving, were shared with conference-goers in the publication *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*,⁹ intended to be distributed on the day of the conference. The conference format – papers, workshops, visuals, and poetry readings – covered an ambitious range of topics, including body image, childhood sexuality, nineteenth and twentieth century feminist theory and activism, disability, race, representation and subjectivity, class, teen girls, self-help books and advice manuals, sexual preference, differences between women, psychoanalysis, sex theory, abortion and fundamentalist campaigns, political organizing, correct and incorrect sexuality, eroticism and the taboo, sexual boundaries, and sex and money. We hoped that a framework which

recognized what often seemed to be contradictory impulses in feminist history and women's lives would alleviate the need for a forced choice between pleasure and danger, as well as provide an inclusive ground for understanding difference.

That hope was dashed in the week before the conference, when anti-pornography feminists made telephone calls to Barnard College officials and trustees, as well as prominent local feminists, complaining that the conference was promoting "anti-feminist" views and had been taken over by "sexual perverts." Lunatic as these claims were, they had a galvanizing effect on the representatives of a sexually conservative women's college and illustrate the consequences of calling in outside authorities to squelch differences of opinion and politics between feminists. A full-scale sexual panic was underway, an episode in which irrational fears about sexuality are mobilized by the effective use of alarming symbols.¹⁰ Within days, the president of Barnard College, Ellen V. Futter, interrogated the staff of the women's center, scrutinized the program, and – concerned about the reactions of funders to sexual topics and images – confiscated copies of the conference booklet, *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*, to prevent its distribution.

The sexual panic intensified on April 24, 1982, the day of the conference and in the weeks to follow (see the Epilogue, pp. 431-439, for a more detailed account of events immediately surrounding the conference). Protesters from Women Against Pornography greeted the over eight-hundred registrants at the entrance to the sold-out conference, distributing a 2-page leaflet which repeated the charges that the conference promoted "anti-feminist sexuality." The leaflet also contained shockingly scurrilous attacks on individual feminists by name, specifying their (real or imagined) objectionable sexual practices. These tactics were McCarthyite: cowardly, surreptitious, dependent on slander and sexual panic for their power. They were also devastatingly effective, causing lasting pain and real damage to the women named. Although some feminists decried such tactics, the fact that individuals and groups who had deployed them were not totally discredited guaranteed that they would be repeated, establishing the principle that zealotry and unprincipled behavior were acceptable in the service of "protecting" women.

The leaflet gave birth to a phantom conference devoted to three issues – sado-masochism, pornography, and butch-femme roles among lesbians. It labelled anyone who questioned the anti-pornography analysis an "anti-feminist." Accounts of the phantom conference were also circulated in hostile publications, for example, *(off our backs)*. Going far beyond advocacy journalism, its opinion-filled reportage ignored most conference papers,

workshops, and speakers, representing the conference only in terms of the sensational charges of the protesters. This coverage exemplified the way in which the leaflet served as a template for subsequent discussion and reception of the conference.

The actual conference was a vigorous intellectual and political intervention, as the contributions to this book amply demonstrate. Its repercussions continued for many years. To the probable chagrin of Barnard officials, it was arguably the most influential, talked about, and read about of the Scholar and Feminist conferences, despite their efforts to suppress publication of the *Diary* and excise all references to Barnard College from this book. Most dramatically, the conference stands as the moment where the dominance of the anti-pornography analysis from 1977-1982 came to an end. For many feminists on the East coast, the Barnard conference signalled the beginning of the "sex wars," the impassioned, contentious, and, to many, disturbing debates, discussions, conferences, and arguments about sexuality that continued unabated until at least 1986.¹¹

What were these debates about? And why were they often "debates," not discussions?¹² It is customary now for observers and commentators to look back at the sex debates and bemoan the unfortunate polarization that occurred, as if both sides were equally extreme and unreasonable. The proposition put forward at the Barnard conference, however, was exceedingly balanced and inclusive: a feminist politics on sexuality had to address both pleasure and danger. That this modest proposal was depicted as a mindless pro-pleasure politics, converted into an attack on feminism, and greeted with boundary-drawing and scapegoating by anti-pornography feminist leaders illustrates the displacement and mischaracterization which have consistently marred the sex debates. The tenor of the debate – already set in earlier West coast controversies – was deepened by the attack on the Barnard conference and continued, in the years that followed, by the scorched-earth policy of prominent anti-pornography feminists, whose followers deserved better leadership than they received.

The common conceptualization that the sex debate had two "sides," dichotomized by opposing positions (pro- or anti-pornography, or pro- or anti-sex, for example) is erroneous, a fallout of the phantom conference effect. In many respects, the two factions were far from equivalent, and efforts to portray them as mirror images of each other did considerable damage to the discussion. At the simplest level, anti-pornography feminists had a clear name, which was self-chosen, and a purpose which could be succinctly summarized: to eliminate pornography. Their critics had a different objective – to initiate a more expansive agenda on sexuality – which was not so easily labelled or expressed in

slogans. Were they pro-pornography feminists, as their enemies charged? Hardly. Although they rejected anti-pornography analysis as exaggerated and dangerous, they agreed that pornography was often sexist.

Were they pro-sex feminists? Some reluctantly acceded to the term, after it had become common short-hand, but others rejected it as a gross oversimplification of their position. (Here, they also rejected the implied disparagement of anti-pornography feminists as anti-sex,¹³ showing a delicacy of concern that was rarely reciprocated.) In discussions specifically about pornography, some called themselves anti-anti-pornography feminists, but that label – aside from its convolution – scarcely reflected the full scope of their concerns about sexuality. Perhaps the term feminist sex radical does the least violence to their project, as long as radical is understood to mean "less a matter of what you do and more a matter of what you are willing to think, entertain, and question."¹⁴ Despite this lack of symmetry, academic authors – often from a safe distance – used the figure of mirror-image polarities to claim a seemingly neutral vantage point from which to describe a middle path for reasonable people. This vantage point, frequently illusory, depended on a two-step maneuver which mischaracterized feminist sex radicals as extremists and at the same time appropriated much of what they actually said.

Beyond these labels, the sides differed in more important ways. Feminist sex radicals were, above all, committed to keeping the sexuality conversation open, avoiding premature closure. Sexuality was too complex, individual, contradictory, too cross-cut by multiple identities to be served by simple generalizations that inadvertently lead to proscription and silencing. Their challenge was combining activism which improved women's situation with a skepticism and inquiry which made continued discovery possible. Feminist sex radicals also differed in tactics: although they argued that the anti-pornography analysis was misguided and dangerous, they did not label its authors "not feminists," as was so often done to them. They never attempted to expel anyone from the movement, or believed that their views defined the borders of acceptable feminist opinion; they didn't categorically refuse to debate with feminists with differing views. For most of the sex debates, feminist sex radicals found it an uphill struggle.

The debates often explicitly focused on the anti-pornography movement's fetishized Big Three – pornography, sado-masochism, and butch-femme roles. For feminist sex radicals, this was a reductive and hysteria-producing frame, but the continual attacks on sexual images, practices, and individuals made

discussion of these issues vital, if sometimes frustratingly reactive. Layered in these discussions, of course, were central questions – how do social relations shape sexuality? What is the relationship between fantasy and behavior? How does power inform sexuality? Can women consent to sex in a patriarchal culture? Yet the obsessive and inexplicable fascination with minority sexual practices seemed to offer a distanced way to discuss questions which, posed differently, might hit uncomfortably close to home. Examination of the supposed rigidity and limitations of butch-femme roles and the place of difference in erotic attraction spoke to heterosexual feminists, not just lesbians, though discussions rarely made the link. Similarly, detailed, often voyeuristic examination of the symbolism and construction of SM sexual behavior seemed to fill the silence in which no one else was talking about their own sexual practices. Unfortunately, the least privileged sexual groups were made to bear the brunt and take the risks in what should have been a conversation in which risk and revelation were shared.

Discussions of the sex wars and the Barnard conference frequently fail to do justice to the women who suffered the most personal and professional attacks. This was not just a theoretical or academic discussion. Feminists suffered ostracism, lost colleagues, friends and opportunities, and still carry the weight of the seemingly distanced and benign euphemism for stigma, "too controversial."¹⁵ Their intervention at the height of anti-pornography sentiment was valuable and courageous, their contributions often offered from what Joan Nestle calls "women's deepest texts" – their own lives.

By the end of 1983, the introduction of a model anti-pornography ordinance in Minneapolis signalled that the sexuality debates had entered a second, more dangerous stage. During the same period that the anti-porn perspective became increasingly contested within feminism, anti-pornography leaders began to look to the state for enforcement of their analysis and to non-feminist constituencies for support. The same leaders who deployed the term "not feminist" as a great insult seemed now to have few reservations about their new allies and audiences. The sex debates continued within feminism, now more – though not exclusively – focused on the wisdom of such ordinances, while a second front had opened as feminist thinkers about sexuality began to address legislators, voters, and the general public.

The ordinance, written as an amendment to existing civil rights law, defined pornography as a form of sex discrimination.¹⁶ It permitted individuals to bring lawsuits for economic damages and removal of sexually explicit material. Authored by Andrea Dworkin, long-time critic of pornography, and Catharine MacKinnon, self-

described Marxist legal scholar and relative newcomer to the sex debates, the ordinance proposed a broad definition of sexual material to be controlled.¹⁷ It proscribed books, magazines, movies, art, and videos which depicted "the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or words," including women "in postures of sexual submission," "as whores by nature," or "being penetrated by objects." Supporters claimed that the ordinance constituted a novel approach to restricting sexually explicit material: it differed from criminal obscenity law, which they uniformly denounced as anti-sexual, moralistic, anti-woman, and anti-gay. In fact, the reach of the ordinance would be much greater than obscenity law, and although its proponents liked to claim that such suits would be in the hands of women, these cases would be processed through the state apparatus of judges and juries not known for their sympathy for feminism.

Advocates vociferously insisted that their ordinance did not constitute censorship. Here, they seemed to believe censorship meant seizure only *before* publication, but not at any other time. The ordinance did, in fact, permit the removal of books and images from public sale and view, if they fell within the definition of pornography provided. Far from targeting sexually violent material, as was claimed, the language of the ordinance, as well as arguments in its favor, revealed a widely cast net that also included images that were sexist, and finally, merely sexual. The evident permeability of boundaries between violence, sexism, and sex not only reflected the subjectivity of each viewer's judgement but also echoed the culture's suspicion that sexuality itself was dangerous, that its depiction did violence to the viewer as well as to the social fabric. Far from novel, the premises of the ordinance were very familiar.¹⁸ For this reason, feminist critics warned that vague and open-ended language like "degradation" and "subordination" would prove inviting to groups traditionally interested in controlling sexual materials.

The progress of the ordinance confirmed these fears almost immediately, as versions of the ordinance were introduced in various localities (Indianapolis, Indiana; Suffolk County, New York; Madison, Wisconsin; Los Angeles County, California; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Bellingham, Washington). Although the bill's support in Minneapolis came from progressive and feminist communities, in every other locality moral conservatives and fundamentalists provided the majority – and sometimes virtually all – of its backing. In Indianapolis, traditional anti-smut groups, frustrated by their inability to eliminate pornography through zoning and obscenity law, imported the ordinance from Minneapolis; a conservative legislator with an anti-ERA, anti-gay

rights record hired Catharine MacKinnon as a consultant to craft a local version of the bill.¹⁹ In Suffolk County, N.Y. the ordinance was introduced by council member Michael D'Andre, whose goal was to protect women, to "restore them to what ladies used to be."²⁰ The rightward turn was unmistakable. Galvanized by the large turnout of Bible-carrying fundamentalists at the Suffolk hearing, New York area feminists started FACT (Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce) to educate other feminists about the dangers of the bill. FACT chapters sprang up in many cities where the ordinance was introduced, helping to defeat it. The bill was enacted into law only in Indianapolis, where it was soon challenged as unconstitutional by a coalition of publishers and booksellers. FACT filed an amicus brief, signed by over 200 prominent feminists including Betty Friedan, Adrienne Rich, and Kate Millett.²¹ (Anti-pornography feminists promptly denounced FACT and its allies as "sexual liberals" and "libertarians."²² The tactic finally seemed to backfire, however, as more and more women who spent their entire adult lifetimes in the feminist movement appeared on the enemies list.) The brief put forward specifically feminist objections to Indianapolis-style ordinances, namely that restricting sexual speech and imagery would ultimately hurt women and was a poor substitute for effective steps to reduce violence and promote equality. In 1986, the Supreme Court let stand a lower court's determination that the ordinance violated the First Amendment.

The introduction of the ordinance and the raging arguments which ensued altered the course of the feminist sex debates in several ways. Many feminists who remained sympathetic to the anti-pornography analysis for several years after Barnard now drew the line at supporting more government control of sexual expression. Anthony Comstock, zealous anti-obscenity crusader, and Margaret Sanger, birth control advocate persecuted in his campaigns, remained vivid figures in their memory, and they had no confidence that government censorship would benefit women. Others were sobered by the years of disagreement about sexual images; if feminists didn't even agree about their meaning or effect, why turn the decision over to the state? In retrospect, anti-pornography leaders' unwavering support of Indianapolis-style ordinances was probably a tactical mistake within feminism. They effectively abandoned a multi-faceted approach of education and persuasion, which aroused considerable sympathy, in favor of single-minded advocacy of the ordinance. They took an irreversible step toward censorship and lost credibility for their alliances – witting and unwitting – with moral conservatives. Once the ordinance was declared unconstitutional, a return to earlier, broader strategies seemed to elude them. A single-issue cam-

paign had now become irrevocably committed to a single tactic.

Within feminism, the ordinance also served to narrow the discussion about sexuality even further, as pornography became the central, sometimes exclusive topic. Debates focused on the meaning and harm of pornography, the effect of new laws, and the dangers of state regulation, eclipsing the expansion of women's pleasure or even the simple recognition of sexuality as the rich, complex social behavior that it is. As the dialogue moved outside feminist audiences, it was increasingly shaped by mainstream considerations. Earlier flash-points – like butch-femme – virtually disappeared, because they had no salience for the general public or did not mesh with pre-existing legal mechanisms to regulate sex. (Sado-masochism, however, remained a hardy staple of the discussion, a demon of anti-pornography feminism which was successfully mainstreamed as "proof" of pornography's violence.) The space for exploration and personal inquiry became smaller. Many feminists wearied of the arguments, which were both volatile and predictable. In addition, as the discussion moved into a broader public arena, the underlying commitment to empowering women could no longer be assumed.

Although the ordinance was a failed strategy within feminism, it proved a brilliant tactic for mainstreaming anti-pornography goals and rhetoric while linking them within pre-existing state regulatory systems. Legislative deliberations popularized anti-pornography feminist arguments, with media coverage misleadingly suggesting that all feminists opposed pornography and that feminist sexual politics could be reduced to the elimination of pornography. This flattened account of feminism suited the mainstream and was more comfortably assimilated than the challenging, open-ended, and anxiety-producing questions that characterized feminism's more indigenous conversations. Traditional anti-pornography groups were introduced to feminist anti-porn arguments and considered how these might be useful in advancing their own moral program.

The 1985-86 Attorney General's Commission on Pornography – better known as the Meese Commission – is emblematic of the right-wing's appropriation of anti-pornography feminism. Appointed during Ronald Reagan's second term to find "new ways to control the problem of pornography," the commission's unswerving support for aggressive obscenity-law enforcement bore the indelible stamp of the right-wing constituency that brought the panel into existence.²³ Its influence was also evident in the frankly stated belief of many commissioners, witnesses, and staff members that pornography leads to immorality, lust and sin. Making no pretense at genuine fact-finding, the panel resorted to tightly controlled witness lists, irregular procedures, and methods