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Final Essay

# Introduction

In this essay I will present Catherine Mackinnon’s stance on gender as a social construct, pornography as sexual liberation, and why it freedom via pornography’s sexual expressiveness is a hollow victory. I will use Foucault’s understanding of the Judeo-Christian and Greek sexual ideology and framework as a support for Mackinnon’s views. In addition, I will explore the relation between Marxism and Mackinnon’s feminist analogy and describe the parallels that exist between them.

# MacKinnon and Marxism

MacKinnon proposed that gender, and thus sexuality is socially, politically and historically rooted in the women’s submissiveness and the man’s superiority; giving rise to power-struggles between the sexes. The man typifies the *Boss* who hires the Worker (*women)* to produce a product (*sex)* from which the Boss will extract all benefits: economic, social, and political.

Marxism is based on the material relation humans have with the world, in relation to each other. Mackinnon uses this framework to propose that a women’s existence is based on the social inferiority derived from sexual relations a women has with man. In similar fashion as work segregates the haves and have-nots, gender-roles splits women and man into powerful and powerless. Work forces workers into inferior roles like sex forces women into inferior roles; the benefits derived from sex are disproportionately appropriated by the boss like the benefits of sex disproportionately benefit the man; while it appears it is the worker vs the boss, in reality it is the relationship to the “work” that creates the division between them, as it is with sex, woman, and man.

# Mackinnon and Gender

MacKinnon proposes that “Gender” is not a mere distinction between sexes – i.e. male and female - but of master and slave, power and powerless, the “fucker” and the “fucked”. Gender is in fact a derivative of a social construct objectifying women to be submissive, and men to be dominant in all social, political, and sexual relationships.

Mackinnon uses Marxism to frame her theory, proposing “work” is to the proletariat as “sex” is to the feminist; Analogous to the capitalist exploitation of the *wage-slave* - whereas workers are only worth the productivity that can be usurped – the women’s worth is calculated in terms of the benefit from sex, as so defined by the man. While not a one-to-one relationship, this analogy does suffice in creating the dynamic between women and man, worker and boss, society’s one-percent and the ninety-nine-percent.

Sexually, women are the means to which men get aroused, “turned on” and gratified. Women are the objects that provide this satisfaction, and a women’s worth is derived from her efficacy in achieving this goal. According to MacKinnon, this social construct is universally accepted by women in both public and private relations, and manifests itself in political, group, and individual spheres of life. This form of “socialization” is rooted in the very fabric of society, and becomes “internalized” by women and is crucial to their self-knowledge and idea of ‘existence’ – as existing for the sole purpose of being a man’s sexual object; this theory fits succinctly in Marx’s philosophy.

The idea of Man, in turn, is more than the scientific male, but is a group-nomenclature signifying a socially constructed ruler or king subjugating the women politically and especially sexually. Men are giving social power through gender-roles and exalted to a dominant position.

Marx defines work as the value that the worker gives, but is usurped by the boss. The boss only uses the worker for the value in which the worker can provide via their labor; the same way Mackinnon proposes women uses sex and the value the women provides to the man. The man is who decides the value of the sex, and by extension the women. Also, since this is a social construct, the idea of gender roles is not a natural or biological phenomenon, but is something that is shaped by what society constructed. Thus, women are defined artificially, and detrimental to their true being and never capable of fully realizing their real worth outside of the gender-based male dominant landscape.

Mackinnon understand gender to be chained to sex-based domination; women forever bound to the “fist of domination” via society’s interpretation of the women’s inferiority and reliance on men. The difference between women and man was not one of value, but of power, of oppression, objectification and obedience. Women are forced not by society’s literal definition of gender, but by the social construct and connotation of gender: women are weak, men are strong; women must follow, men must lead; “women are powerless”, men are “powerful”. Thus, it is not the scientific difference of male and female, but the socially constructed acceptance that men receive certain traits verses women: power, strength, ability, leadership, against weakness, inability, negativity, and so on. This social framework comes not by science or natural occurrence, but via culture, social upbringing, and oppression.

Marxism focuses on the relationship the worker and capitalist have with the labor of the worker, as does Mackinnon’s interpretation focuses on the relationship the woman and man have with the gender-based social-construct that gives men the sex-based profit of the woman’s sexual labor.

# MacKinnon and Foucault

Foucault understood that women could only be “free” in relation to men; for men held the power and the women derived their power from pleasing man. As long as women were considered worthy in relation to man, and man found a women’s worth in sex while society defined sex as something evil, or bad, or sinful (especially in Judeo-Christian society) then women would never be truly free.

Foucault proposed that a more ethical system is needed and used the Greek ideology of sex as the foundation. Mackinnon did not pursue the religious perception to frame her argument, but parallels do exist. Foucault argued that as long as sex is deemed evil, no significant change in social relations between woman and man (including man and boy) could surface; similarly Mackinnon stated that as long as the social-construct of a women’s worth is defined in relations to the man’s sexual benefit, no matter how much sexual freedom a women gained it would still be a “hollow-victory”. In fact, a women would simply reciprocate the objectification received from men, internalize it, and objectify herself. Again, this draws parallels to Marx’s theory that the worker becomes the boss and will inevitably exploit his fellow workers if the worker’s ideology is not fundamentally changed.

Mackinnon magnificently states that the male domination is rooted in the ideal that “no woman escapes the meaning of being a woman within a gendered social system”. Foucault also focused on the ideological aspect of sex, which correlates with Mackinnon’s view in respect to the historical, social and ethical framework of society. For Foucault, sex in society forces some people into subordinate roles due to the socially-dominant social and religious norms, while Mackinnon proposes that sex forces women into subordinate roles due to the socially-dominant male interpretation of sexual relations between man and woman.

# Women & Sexual Liberation

Interestingly, feminists used pornography as the sword in which to pierce the heart of oppression. Pornography was one means through which a women’s sexual expression ironically fought against society’s objectification and definition. Feminists endorsed it, going so far as to claim “sexually explicit material is a source of sexual liberation and general freedom”. Mackinnon thought pornography walked a very thin-line, as a source of liberation and also as a “source of sexual oppression and general unfreedom”.

Pornography allowed a women to take control of their sexuality, albeit still to the pleasure of man. Porn brought forth a new understanding of “nudity, lesbianism, oral genital sex, and non-marital sex”. Pornography allowed a woman to no longer be tied to a man, to society’s ideal of a “good woman”, to the Judeo-Christian ethic, but was free to explore her sexuality with man, as well as women publicly, explicitly, and in forcibly. Still, inherent in this new sexual-freedom was the old socially-constructed subjugation that forced women to exploit themselves sexually for the benefit of man (and women). Sure a woman could “rebel” against oppression through pornography, but Mackinnon realized this did not diminish the objectification of women, but simply created a new form of sexually repression.

# When Victory is not enough

The victory women gained via pornography - control of their sexuality, openness and freedom to love who they wanted - still lived inside man’s interpretation of their worth, as sexual objects. Thus, when Mackinnon stated that “merely removing the onus placed upon sexual expressiveness” i.e. ability to express themselves freely via porn, would be a “hollow victory”, she understand the victory only allowed women to participate in the rewards of exploiting women.

True freedom and liberation would only come from a change in the social construct: the *Marxist revolution.* Mackinnon continues her line of reasoning, stating that even if “women were to trade roles with man, e.g. masochism and sadist”, or to “dehumanize and exploit man”, or “degrade man”, the social construct would still exist to the benefit of neither man nor women.

Thus, Pornography is a hollow victory: inadequate for the true feminist, insufficient for the Marxist revolution, and ethically deficient for Foucault’s Greek-sex-theory to triumph over the Judeo-Christian sexual-sin. True freedom, according to Mackinnon, must be more than “sex = nonviolence = life”, because that will “only negate what men have said in the past”. Women must not define their sexuality in terms of man and society’s definition, for that would continue to define a women’s worth in terms of society’s male-based definition: women are sexually, politically and socially inferior to men.

More than the ability to have sex openly and expressively without Judeo-Christian damnation, women require a change in the socially constructed idea of what it means to “be a woman” in order to fully realize their worth and gain respect. Pornography, as proposed by Mackinnon, merely focuses on the ability to express oneself sexually without fear of oppression; while a woman’s liberation requires the capability of women to define their existence regardless of sex, but in terms of humanity.