

Prompt 3: According to MacKinnon, “Women are less repressed than oppressed, so-called women’s sexuality largely a construct of male sexuality” (1989,152), a reality that is obscured by the fact that “all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water” (1989, 149). Rubin, in contrast, focuses on “the sexual system” and “sexual ideology” (1984, 23) that creates “hierarchies of sexual value” (1984, 13) and a “system of erotic stigma” (1984, 12), obscured by a culture of “sex negativity” (1984, 11). After very briefly explaining these two sets of claims, you are asked to explain and critically evaluate how each author would likely respond to the claims of the other author.

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The controversy over sexuality between radical cultural feminism (represented by MacKinnon) and sex radical feminism (represented by Rubin) lies at the core of debates on gender and erotic politics. This essay will elaborate on the two theorists' arguments and likely response to each other, regarding 1) the social constructive forces of sexuality and 2) the nature of sex and pornography, with an analysis of the strengths and flaws of both sides' propositions.

First, MacKinnon and Rubin hold opposite views on the social constructive forces on sexual practices. MacKinnon holds that the decisive shaping force is male supremacy. She indicates sexuality is "defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive of the meaning of gender" (MacKinnon 128), emphasizing that the power imbalance between males and females greatly influences sexuality. Conversely, Rubin believes that sexuality is mainly constructed through law, policy, and beliefs, underscoring that social regulation directly shapes the idea of "sexuality" itself, apart from the influence of male dominance. For instance, instead of male supremacy, sex law is considered "the most adamant instrument of sexual stratification and erotic persecution" (Rubin 18).

In response to MacKinnon, Rubin will stress the view that feminism and sexuality are separate regimes. While she would agree that feminist theory has some power to explain erotic stratifications, such a study on gender oppression cannot explain the suppression against erotic groups thoroughly, as gender and erotic desire are inherently distinctive existences (Rubin 32). For instance, feminism's rejection of erotic behavior due to the concern that "sexual liberation is only a mere extension of male privilege (Rubin 28)", in fact reproduces erotic oppression against every erotic group by rejecting their natural desire. Instead, Rubin proposes that "it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate

social existence (Rubin 33)". This separation between feminism and sexuality studies is advantageous for avoiding oversimplification in categorizing oppressions. Zooming into homosexual erotic groups, for example, Rubin focuses on their experience of being considered "bad", "abnormal", and "unnatural" in biased sex-hierarchy ideologies (Rubin 14), as well as being inhibited from entering the United States as enforced by immigration policy (Rubin 21). From a completely new perspective that targets systemically analyzing the suppression derived from sexuality, this more accurately captures the origin of the oppression because of the power structure between heterosexual and homosexual opposition, rather than the less pertinent gender oppression or male supremacy. Meanwhile, it is also worth mentioning that this argument may also fall under the fallacy of oversimplifying the feminist stance. As Rubin admits, feminist thought about sex is profoundly polarized (Rubin 29), and there is one side that "called for a sexual liberation", intending it "would work for men as well as for men (Rubin 28)". But as Rubin crafts her argument based on a premise that feminism is predominantly "conservative", "anti-sexual", and "anti-porn" (Rubin 28), it can result in a distorted representation of feminism's stance on sexuality.

MacKinnon may fight back by arguing that feminism and sexuality are never discrete, and male dominance should always be taken into consideration, since "to limit feminism to correcting sex bias by acting in theory as if male power did not exist in fact... is to limit feminist theory the way sexism limits women's lives" (MacKinnon 128). Heading back to homosexual sexuality, MacKinnon insists that such a social practice is still deeply influenced by the male supremacy social ideology. She indicates that some homosexual sex is still a mimicry of heterosexual eroticism as they express adopted gender roles and clothing, or if not, the erotic

excitement is derived from the parody of the standard gender power structure (MacKinnon 141). In this sense, the regulation against homosexual erotic divergences is only intended to maintain heterosexual dominance and the corresponding gender power structure, in which male obtains ascendancy. However, this stance could be flawed because the overgeneralization of sex as a construct dominantly of gender power imbalance can mean a neglect of intersectionality. As MacKinnon points out when mentioning the current pornography's harm on individuals, "each (porn) specifically victimized and vulnerable group of women, each tabooed target group - Black women, Asian women, Latin women, Jewish women, pregnant women, disabled women, retarded women, poor women... (MacKinnon 8)", this implies that gender isn't the sole aspect of one's identity; sexual suffering is also shaped by one's class, race, and region. To draw an equal sign between sexual suppression and gender power dynamics may result in a lack of comprehensiveness of the intersecting perspective in its analysis of sexuality.

Second, MacKinnon and Rubin's views on the nature of sex and pornography vary. For MacKinnon, sex is inherently a form of violence: "forcible violation of women is the essence of sex" (MacKinnon 140). Furthermore, such an eroticized dynamic of force, control, and consolidation of male power is constructed and spread through pornography, the means through which women are portrayed as "desperately wanting possession and cruelty and dehumanization" (MacKinnon 139). On the contrary, Rubin believes that just like the 1982 Barnard Conference's theme, sexuality for women is not only a source of danger but also brings pleasure (Rubin 201). Besides, anti-pornography or anti-sexology is problematic because pornography and human sexuality are so often misrepresented as the worst possible (Rubin 28).

Responding to the claim that sex brings joy, MacKinnon will reckon that sex, as a construct and reproducer of male supremacy, is not inherently pleasing for women. This is because the claim of “sex is positive” and women’s real attitudes toward sex are mutually contradictory. If sexuality is any positive or rewarding, it is striking that not every woman eroticizes acts of dominance, not all are fond of pornography, and a great many feel resentment toward rape (MacKinnon 149). In fact, men are the only group that obtains a sense of joy from sexual behavior, as the criterion of being sexual is to give a man an erection (MacKinnon 137). Admittedly, she would agree that though some women may indeed find enjoyment in sexual practices that are intrinsically abusive, this is only a mental defensive mechanism through which women seek mental excuses, notably Freudian de-repression theory, to frame their bodily responses as genuine when betrayed by their physical experiences (MacKinnon 148). This stance is intriguing for justifying sex negativity from a new perspective. The traditional sex negativity, accused by Rubin, is grounded in cultural taboo; for instance, Christian tradition believes that genitalia and its desire are inferior to the mind and thus makes erotic acts evil (Rubin 11). MacKinnon’s justification henceforth prompts re-examination of the differences in sexual experiences between genders and understated oppression women may suffer in terms of sex, for they are “less repressed than oppressed” (MacKinnon 152). Nevertheless, this claim is deficient since it fails to strike a proper balance between structure and agency. An overemphasis on how sex victimizes women, such as “Inequality itself, subjection itself, hierarchy itself, objectification itself, with self-determination ecstatically relinquished, is the apparent content of women’s sexual desire” (MacKinnon 139), may overlook the fact that women do have the will to negotiate, resist, or redefine sexual experiences beyond being passive recipients of

power.

Rubin may dispute MacKinnon's anti-sex and anti-pornography stance by contending that sex negativity is nothing but a moral panic, which means anti-sex practices "rarely alleviate any real problem, because they are aimed at chimeras and signifiers" (Rubin 25). As sexism originates from society rather than the sex industry or the sex minority communities (Rubin 28), simply antagonizing every sexual practice does not directly address the problematic patriarchal social order itself. With the infamously denounced BDSM erotic group as an example, there is no indication that those who read S/M erotica or practice sadomasochism commit a disproportionate share of sex crimes (Rubin 26); targeting S/M sexual practices as violent in a one-sided way means the issues concerning genuine sex crime offenders will remain unaddressed. Similarly, by its very nature, anti-porn rhetoric amounts to a massive scapegoating practice: it focuses criticism on non-routine forms of love or intimacy, while turning a blind eye to the routine instances of oppression, exploitation, or violence that are far more harmful (Rubin 207). Still, Rubin's reply, though seemingly plausible, involves certain drawbacks. On the one hand, it fails to directly address MacKinnon's core focus of whether sex was a tool of violence. Instead, it logically deviates by shifting the discussion to whether anti-sexual practices were effective, while the controversy over whether sex is abusive for women remains unsolved. Moreover, sexuality is not only shaped by gender inequality, but also functions as the dynamic of inequality of the sexes (MacKinnon 130). In this sense, even if pornography and minor erotic practices are not the main cause of the power structure in sexual practices, they're still responsible for reproducing and constructing patriarchal social norms and should be held responsible for it.

Bibliography

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