

Lesson 11

Sex in Society: Pornography

Reading 2

Excerpts from Catherine MacKinnon (1989).

MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a feminist theory of state*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

“Possession and use of women through the sexualization of intimate intrusion and access to them is a central feature of women’s social definition as inferior and feminine... In contemporary industrial society, pornography is an industry that mass produces sexual intrusion on, access to, possession and use of women by and for men for profit. It exploits women’s sexual and economic inequality for gain. It sells women to men as and for sex. It is a technologically sophisticated traffic in women.

This understanding of the reality of pornography... must contend with a legal tradition of neutralization through abstraction from the realities of power, a tradition that has authoritatively defined pornography as not about women as such at all, but about sex... Uncovering gender in this area of law reveals women to be most invisible when most exposed and most silent when used in defense of speech. In both pornography and the law of obscenity, women are seen only as sex and heard only when mouthing a sexual script” (pp. 195-196).

...

“In liberalism, speech must never be sacrificed for other social goals. But liberalism has never understood this reality of pornography: the free so-called speech of men silences the free speech of women... First, women do not simply have freedom of speech on a social level. The most basic assumption underlying First Amendment adjudication [law] is that, socially, speech is free... This tends to presuppose that whole segments of the population are not systematically silenced socially prior to government action. Second, the law of the First Amendment comprehends that freedom of expression, in the abstract, is a system but fails to comprehend that sexism (and racism), in the concrete, are also systems. As a result, it cannot grasp that the speech of some silences the speech of others in a way that is not simply a matter of competition for airtime” (pp. 205-206).
