

“Just a john? Pornography and men’s choices”

by Robert Jensen

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There has been much talk at this conference about the need for men to love each other and be willing to speak openly about that love. That is important; we need to be able to get beyond the all-too-common male tendency to mute or deform our emotions, a tendency that is destructive not only to ourselves but to those around us. Many this weekend have spoken about our need to nurture each other, and that’s important, too. But it’s also crucial to remember that loving one another means challenging ourselves as well.

That’s what I would like to do today, to challenge us -- in harsh language -- on men’s use of pornography. In an unjust world, those of us with privilege must be harsh on ourselves, out of love.

This challenge is: Can we be more than just johns?

Let me start with a story that a female student at the University of Texas told me. She was riding from Austin to Dallas for a football game on a bus chartered by a fraternity, on which many of the passengers were women. During the trip, someone put into the bus’ VCR a sexually explicit video. Uncomfortable with those hardcore sexual images of women being used by men, the female student began a discussion with the people around her about it, and one of the men on the bus agreed that it was inappropriate. He stood up and said to the other men, “You all know me and know I like porno as much as the next guy, but it’s not right for us to play this tape when there are women on the bus.”

No doubt it took some courage for that young man to confront his fraternity brothers on the issue, and we should honor that. But we should recognize that his statement also communicated to his fraternity brothers that he was one of them -- “one of the guys” -- who, being guys, naturally like pornography. His objection was not to pornography and men’s routine purchase and use of women’s bodies for sexual pleasure but to the viewing of it with women present. He was making it clear that his ultimate loyalty was to men and their right to use women sexually, though that use should conform to some type of code of chivalry about being polite about it in mixed company.

In doing that, he was announcing his own position in regard to sex. He was saying: I’m just a john.

Pimps and johns

A john is a man who buys another human being for sex. Typically that other human being

is sold through an intermediary known as a pimp.

Pimps sell the bodies of other people (most typically, a male pimp selling a woman) to a third person (who is almost always a man).

Men sell women to other men for sex: Pimps and johns.

There is much that could be said about the current cultural practice of using the term “pimp” in a wide variety of other contexts -- for example, the MTV show “Pimp My Ride.” We live in a world in which men who sell women are glorified. It also is a world in which the dominant white culture implicitly defines a pimp as black and then alternately celebrates and denigrates them. The confluence of racism and sexism in these cultural trends deserves discussion. But today I want to concentrate not on the pimps but on the johns, on the men who buy women for sex.

I assume that lots of the men in this room use, or have used, pornography. I assume that lots of the men in this room masturbate, or have masturbated, to pornography. So, I assume there are lots of johns and former johns in this room.

I don't mean that most of us have necessarily bought a woman from a pimp in prostitution, though no doubt some in the audience have. I'm talking about the far more common experience of masturbating to pornography. In my childhood and young adulthood, I was sometimes a john. Virtually every man I know has been a john. Some number of you in this room no doubt still are johns.

In pornography, the pimp is called a publisher or a video producer, and the john is called a fan or a pornography consumer. But that doesn't change the nature of the relationships: One person (usually a man) selling another person (a woman) to a third person (usually a man).

So, pornography is pimps and johns, mass-mediated. When you masturbate to pornography, you are buying sexual pleasure. You are buying a woman. The fact that there are technologies of film or video between you and the pimp doesn't change the equation. Legally, it's not prostitution, but you're a john. Legally, you're not in trouble, but you're still just a john.

The pornography that johns like

At this point, let me define a few terms. In this discussion, I'm using the term pornography to describe the graphic sexually explicit material that one finds in a pornographic video store that depicts primarily heterosexual sex and is consumed primarily, though not exclusively, by heterosexual men. Such material is also widely available on the Internet. There are, of course, other genres of pornography (such as gay or lesbian). But I'm speaking today of the material that I would suspect most of the men in the room have used most routinely -- those DVDs and videos that are the bulk of the

commercial pornography market.

There are three consistent themes in that pornography:

--All women want sex from all men at all times.

--Women naturally desire the kind of sex that men want, including sex that many women find degrading.

--Any woman who does not at first realize this can be turned with a little force (though force is rarely needed because most women in pornography instinctively understand their "true" sexual nature).

The pornography industry produces two major types of films, features and gonzo. Features mimic, however badly, the conventions of a Hollywood movie. There is some minimal plot, character development, and dialogue, all in the service of presenting the sex. Gonzo films have no such pretensions; they are simply recorded sex, often in a private home or on some minimal set. These films often start with an interview with the woman or women about their sexual desires before the man or men enter the scene.

All these films have a standard series of sex acts, including oral, vaginal, and anal penetration, often performed while the men call the women "bitch," "cunt," "whore," and similar names. As they are penetrated, the women are expected to say over and over how much they like the sex. As pornography like this has become increasingly normalized and mainstream -- readily available throughout the country by increasingly sophisticated technology -- pornographers have pushed the limits of what is acceptable in the mainstream.

One of the increasingly common types of sex in gonzo, and less common in features, is the double penetration -- a scene in which a woman is penetrated anally and vaginally by two men at the same time. Another type of sex scene in gonzo is a "blow bang" -- a scene in which a woman performs oral sex on a group of men, with each man in turn ejaculating onto the woman's face or into her mouth in standard pornographic fashion. Some gonzo tapes advertise "ATM," or "ass-to-mouth," in which a man removes his penis from the woman's anus and she puts it directly into her mouth.

As one pornographic film director put it: "People want more. They want to know how many dicks you can shove up an ass. ...Make it more hard, make it more nasty, make it more relentless."

How many dicks can you shove up an ass? It's rare, but there are films with double anals: Two men penetrating a woman anally at the same time.

In recent years, the pornography industry has produced about 11,000 new hardcore, graphic sexually explicit films a year. Estimates of the annual revenues of the pornography industry in the United States start at \$10 billion. For comparison, the Hollywood box office -- the amount Americans spend to go to the movies -- was \$9.5 billion in 2003.

That's a lot of johns and a lot of profit for the pimps.

Men's choices and responsibility

So, we live in a world in which men sell women to other men directly. And men also sell women to other men through mass media. These days, women are sometimes the buyers. And on rare occasions in recent years, women are the sellers. That is, there are women who consume pornography and a few women who make it. In this society, that's called progress. Feminism is advanced, we are told, when women can join the ranks of those who buy and sell other human beings.

All this is happening as a predictable result of the collaboration of capitalism and patriarchy. Take a system that values profit over everything, and combine it with a system of male supremacy: You get pimps and johns, and pornography that is increasingly normalized and mainstreamed, made into everyday experience. Because it's profitable in a capitalist world. And because men take it as their right to consume women's sexuality in a patriarchal world.

When confronted with this, men often suggest that because women in pornography choose to participate, there's no reason to critique men's use of pornography. We should avoid that temptation to take that easy way out. I'm going to say nothing in regard to what women should do, nor am I going to critique their choices. I don't take it as my place to inject myself in the discussions that women have about this. (A new book, "Not for Sale," has interesting insights into those questions.

<http://www.spinifexpress.com.au/non-fict/nfs.htm>)

I do, however, take it as my place to talk to men. I take it as a political/moral responsibility to engage in critical self-reflection and be accountable for my behavior, at the individual and the collective level. For men, the question is not about women's choices. It's about men's choices. Do you want to participate in this system in which women are sold for sexual pleasure, whether it's in prostitution, pornography, strip bars, or any other aspect of the sex industry? Do you want to live in a world in which some people are bought and sold for the sexual pleasure of others?

When one asks such questions, one of the first things one will hear is: These are important issues, but we shouldn't make men feel guilty about this. Why not? I agree that much of the guilt people feel -- rooted in attempts to repress human sexuality that unfortunately are part of the cultural and theological history of our society -- is destructive. But guilt also can be a healthy emotional and intellectual response to the world and one's actions in it.

Johns should feel guilty when they buy women. Guilt is a proper response to an act that is unjust. When we do things that are unjust, we should feel guilty. Guilt can be a sign that we have violated our own norms. It can be a part of a process of ending the injustice. Guilt can be healthy, if it is understood in political, not merely religious or psychological,

terms.

Buying women is wrong not because of a society's repressive moral code or its effects on an individual's psychological process. It is wrong because it hurts people. It creates a world in which people get hurt. And the people who get hurt the most are women and children, the people with the least amount of power. When you create a class that can be bought and sold, the people in that group will inevitably be treated as lesser, as available to be controlled and abused.

The way out of this is not church or therapy, though you may engage in either or both of those practices for various reasons. The way out of being a john is political. The way out is feminism. I don't mean feminism as a superficial exercise in identifying a few "women's issues" that men can help with. I mean feminism as an avenue into what Karl Marx called "the ruthless criticism of the existing order, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be."

We need to engage in some ruthless criticism. Let's start not just with pornography, but with sex more generally. One of those discoveries, I think, is not only that men often are johns, but that the way in which johns use women sexually is a window into other aspects of our sexual and intimate lives as well. For many men, sex is often a place where we both display and reinforce our power over women. By that, I don't mean that all men at all times use sex that way all the time, but that a pattern of such relationships is readily visible in this society. Women deal with it every day, and at some level most men understand it.

We can see that pornography not only raises issues about the buying and selling of women, but -- if we can remain ruthless and not shrink from our own discoveries -- about sex in general, about the way in which men and women in this culture are commonly trained to be sexual. It's not just about pimps and johns and the women prostituted. It's about men and women, and sex and power. If throughout this discussion you have been thinking, "Well, that's not me -- I never pay for it," don't be so sure. It's not just about who pays for it and who doesn't. It's about the fundamental nature of the relationship between men and women, and how that plays out in sex and intimacy.

And if you think this doesn't affect you because you are one of the "good men," don't be so sure. I'm told that I am one of those good men. I work in a feminist movement. I have been part of groups that critique men's violence and the sex industry. And I struggle with these issues all the time. I was trained to be a man in this culture, and that training doesn't evaporate overnight. None of us is off the hook.

What is sex for?

No matter what our personal history or current practice, we all might want to ask a simple question: What is sex for?

A male friend once told me that he thought that sometimes sex can be like a warm handshake, nothing more than a greeting between friends. Many people assert that sex can be a purely physical interaction to produce pleasurable sensations in the body.

At the same time, sex is said to be the ultimate act of intimacy, the place in which we expose ourselves most fully, where we let another see us stripped down, not just physically but emotionally.

Certainly sex can be all those things to different people at different times. But is that not a lot to ask sex to carry? Can one human practice really carry such a range of meanings and purposes? And in such a context, in a male-supremacist culture in which men's violence is still tacitly accepted and men's control of women is often unchallenged, should we be surprised that sex becomes a place where that violence and control play out?

This isn't an argument for some imposition of a definition of sex. It's an invitation to confront what I believe is a crucial question for this culture. The conservative framework, often rooted in narrow religious views, for defining appropriate sex in order to control people is a disaster. The liberal/libertarian framework that avoids questions of gender and power has failed.

We live in a time of sexual crisis. That makes life difficult, but it also creates a space for invention and creativity. That is what drew me to feminism, to the possibility of a different way of understanding the world and myself, the possibility of escaping the masculinity trap set for me, that chance to become something more than a man, more than just a john -- to become a human being.

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