

WAP Feminists Line Up with Anti-Sex Right Wing Pornography, Capitalism & Censorship

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When Jenny Shipley, the Minister for Women's Affairs, introduced the "Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Bill" into Parliament last year, she said: "The bill will send some very clear messages about the society we want, and the types of behaviour which are totally unacceptable." That's not so surprising. What's surprising is that the bill's feminist supporters are promoting the same kind of society as Jenny Shipley and her various parliamentary colleagues.

What Shipley and the National and Labour Governments want and have been administering is a society of mass unemployment, benefit cuts and health charges. This latest anti-sex drive, given a leftist, "pro-women" cover by its feminist backers in Women Against Pornography (WAP), is all part of Shipley & Co.'s reactionary agenda.

The pornography debate has generated considerable heat. In defending themselves against their critics on the left, the feminist proponents of anti-porn censorship frequently cite "snuff" movies—sex murders staged for commercial profit, a sickening criminal activity which must, of course, be suppressed. But snuff movies are not the issue; they are only introduced into the debate to blur the real question. The campaign of Women Against Pornography, like that of the traditional right, is *broadly* targeted; it is directed at the preponderance of sexually explicit material which is available—indeed WAP recently called for Parliament "to be bold and brave" and to ban not just "extreme" forms of pornography, but *all* forms (*Dominion*, 14 April 1993).

No to Censorship!

The left has traditionally taken a strong stand against state censorship, and for good reason. The power of censorship has been used around the world to muzzle political opposition—by suppressing dissenting views, shaping the presentation of the day-to-day class struggle, and reinforcing the mechanisms of ideology in a thousand ways.

During the 1951 waterfront lockout, which saw one of the most significant defeats in the history of the New Zealand working class, a key ruling-class weapon was a ban on working-class political literature. And during the 1950s and '60s, cultural life in this country was stunted by a series of bans on such well known works as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Lolita*, and *Portnoy's Complaint*. There were some bizarre twists to this anti-sex, anti-culture regime: as things started to liberalise a little in the 1960s

they allowed the showing of the film *Ulysses*—but to gender-segregated audiences only!

From time to time the capitalist class and its representatives update their censorship legislation; and the last Labour Government and the current National Government have both pushed towards tougher censorship laws. Labour sought to use its advocacy of censorship to maintain some kind of left face. And today Jenny Shipley too is trying to use the issue to appear supportive of women's rights, occasionally adopting some of the language of the feminist anti-pornography movement.

Ruling Class Centralises Censorship Tools

As part of their plan to broaden the capitalist state's repressive powers, Shipley & Co.'s new bill will centralise the censorship of all films, videos and printed publications into a single Classification Office, with a single Review Board. Its purpose is to limit as far as possible the range of images of sexual behaviour which are available in this society. In recent decades there has been a tendency in most advanced capitalist countries for the dominance of the traditional nuclear family—the central institution in the oppression of women—to be undermined; the single parent family, for example, usually with a woman at its head, is becoming increasingly common, as are other non-traditional forms. The National Government's anti-porn bill is one part of the state's drive to shore up the male-dominated nuclear family and the ideology which surrounds it as crucial props to the capitalist system.

In addition to its ideological function, this bill will be an instrument of abuse and harassment, like the drug laws. The bill includes provisions for searches where there are "reasonable grounds" to believe there is "objectionable" material on the premises, and for conviction, even if the material is not classified as "objectionable" until *after* it has been found by the police. And it will be no defence if you "had no knowledge or no reasonable cause to believe that the publication to which the charge relates was objectionable"!

So, what is "objectionable"? The bill defines the word as meaning any material which "deals with matters of sex, horror, crime, cruelty, or violence in such a manner that...is likely to be injurious to the public good." And in deciding whether, for example, a sex video is likely to be "injurious to the public good" the Classification Office is required to take into account such entirely subjective matters as whether a publication "degrades or dehumanises any person."

New Bill to be Prop for Women's Oppression

The Chief Censor, the Deputy Chief Censor, and the

members of the Board of Review will all be appointed by the Minister of Internal Affairs, acting with the concurrence of the Minister of Women's Affairs and the Minister of Justice. In the present government the Minister of Internal Affairs is the anti-gay, anti-abortion fanatic, Graeme Lee; the Minister of Women's Affairs is the benefit-gouger Jenny Shipley herself; and the Minister of Justice is the pretentious patrician snob, Doug Graham. There is not much question that the appointments *they* make will be tailored to suit the political requirements of the government of the time, the state and the ruling class.

The function of the state is to make sure that the capitalist system functions for the benefit of the bosses. The restrictive nuclear family unit, dominated by the husband, is vital to that functioning. Capitalism needs the family to provide domestic services and childcare, to train people to live and work within the capitalist system, and to form an ideological environment in which people see capitalism and the ways in which it works as "normal" or "natural."

The central purpose of this legislation is to strengthen the power of the state to determine what printed and audio-visual representations of sexuality we are allowed to see. But in its appropriation of further power to control what we read and see about sex, the state is extending its power to reinforce the sexual stereotypes which help hold the family system together. This is bound to increase oppression, both of women and of anyone whose sexuality differs from the idealised family-centred norms. So with this new legislation the government doesn't intend to protect *women*; the government intends to protect the *family*.

Anti-pornography legislation is simply *not a reform*, not a concession. The point is not that it doesn't go far enough—which is what Women Against Pornography and Patricia Bartlett's anti-sex crusaders all believe—it's that it goes in the wrong direction completely. It does not give us more power over our lives, it takes power away from us and gives it to the reactionary capitalist state.

Feminists Ally with Bartlett's Moral Right

Contrary to the beliefs of many feminists, there is nothing inherently progressive about the social and political action of women. In this society women have traditionally been assigned the role of the custodians of "moral standards," of "God's police." After the great strikes of the 1890s women played an important role in the service of capitalism in taming a wild colonial working class.

The "Women's Christian Temperance Union" (WCTU), for example, campaigned for women's right to vote, but also campaigned for years against liquor. Only the votes of the troops in Britain prevented prohibition in 1919. The WCTU actually succeeded in establishing many dry areas, and also six o'clock closing of pubs, which was a central feature of New Zealand social life until 1967. Many women, with very few choices in sight, were persuaded that they had an interest in using the state to protect the family from the evils of the local pub.

The Christian-moralist Patricia Bartlett clearly comes out of this tradition—but so also does the *feminist*-moralist Women Against Pornography. The New Zealand women's movement has always had a right wing, and today that right wing is WAP. The latter's alliance with the mainstream political right is disturbing and ironic, for it puts feminists into bed with those who oppose abortion, birth control, childcare, homosexuality and solo-parenthood.

WAP and 'Correct' Sex

WAP wants to limit portrayals of sexual activity to what it calls "erotica": clean, tender and soft-focus. Some of WAP's statements have suggested that what they consider to be "acceptable" sexual material should neither involve men nor be attractive to them. WAP's claim is that "pornography"—by which WAP means the sexually explicit material which *it* doesn't like—is the *cause* of violence against women and of rape. Many people may feel this claim is supported by intuition or anecdote, but it is not supported by research (see: R. Coward, "Sexual Violence and Sexuality," *Feminist Review*, June 1982; "Does Viewing Pornography Lead Men to Rape?" in G. Chester & J. Dickey ed, *Feminism and Censorship: The Current Debate*, 1988).

The central purpose of pornography is to achieve sexual arousal. The problem for WAP and its ideological inspirers is that they believe that male sexual arousal is inherently dangerous, and that heterosexual feelings and activities are the basic cause of the oppression of women. Having sex with men is not the *cause* of women's oppression; and the domain of sexual activity is not one where the struggle for women's liberation can be fought to a successful conclusion. It is true that sexual life is structured and deformed by the family unit, and these deformities will continue until the family is transcended; but it is not our sex lives which create the twisted social framework, rather it is the capitalist social framework which twists our sex lives.

The WAP cardboard cutout version of human sexuality involves a dichotomy between the aggressive, dominating male and the gentle, nurturing female. The male is said to be physical; the female, spiritual. The male's "pornography" is about lust, power and bodies; the female's "erotica" is about love, gentleness and commitment.

WAP's Victorian conception of gender and sexuality is thoroughly reactionary. There's a strong dose of biological determinism in this outlook. In fact the conditions which shape our sexual lives are created by a social framework which changes as society changes; this current conditioning will only be transcended when the oppressive nuclear family is replaced, when it ceases to be an obligatory ideal imposed by the massive economic and ideological pressures of the current capitalist order and exists instead, for those who want it, simply as one particular mode out of a range of accessible social options.

Sexuality is shaped by history, and historically the sexuality which is "proper" for women has been confined, restricted and limited far more than that which is

“proper” for men. Women are not supposed to feel lust, or to enjoy a good bonk for its own sake. This ideology of repression is perpetuated by WAP: for them, as for the anti-sex moral right, promiscuous or emotionally uncommitted sex is a social sin. And so women who even *fantasise* about vigorous, physical sex are not “real” women.

There is nothing at all liberating about WAP politics: they simply aim to be the sex- and mind-police of a new epoch. The resultant standard of “politically correct feminist sex” leads them to condemn not only depictions of heterosexual activity by women (who are “fucking the oppressors”) but also certain depictions of lesbian sex (which may be seen as “adopting male role models”).

Male supremacist behaviour is not innate—it derives from the complex process of socialisation through which boys and girls assimilate the appropriate behaviour patterns for the roles assigned them by the nuclear family. A man’s relative power inside the traditional family unit is often in sharp contrast to his powerlessness at work—home is where he can vent his frustrations and try to maintain some illusion of control over his life. Violence is often the product. And of course it is often difficult for a woman with a violent partner to escape, particularly if she has children—with the economic and social difficulties of raising children alone, the existing capitalist system presents important obstacles to independence.

‘Pornography’ versus ‘Erotica’?

The distinction between “pornography” and “erotica” which is at the centre of the WAP worldview is both arbitrary and revealing. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, for example, gives the common meaning for [pornography] as “explicit description or exhibition of sexual activity in literature, films, etc., intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings.” “Erotica” is given a meaning which is very similar, but the word as commonly used seems to have a nuance suggesting some kind of artistic dimension. The bottom line of WAP’s position is that they object to sex *without the art*, to sexual arousal simply for the sake of being turned on. WAP wants to burn all the tacky, low-budget sex videos with the shoddy lighting; in an ideal WAP world there would be good, clean Film Festival fare, with high production values and a romantic, pro-“commitment” moral.

Much pornographic material violates the canons of literary or cinematic criticism; but they are after all completely irrelevant to its objectives. Pornography is a genre not notable for its subtlety, and many would find much of it tasteless or offensive, particularly when encountered outside the context for which it’s intended. But Women Against Pornography should no more be able to impose their own preferences on the rest of the world—in this case, for subtlety, good taste and emotional commitment—than should someone who believes that WAP’s favoured “erotica” is cloying, moralistic and boring.

All kinds of images in literature and film, whether popular or “serious,” reflect social reality. In a world where the patterns of ordinary domestic lives are cor-

rupted and distorted by the anxiety, insecurity and compulsions of a destructive social order, it is hardly surprising that most representations of human relationships and sexuality are also corrupted and distorted.

The solution to the special oppression of women requires a revolutionary change in the material conditions of life. Until women are freed from the responsibilities of childcare and domestic drudgery, from the economic pressures to remain in bad relationships and the patriarchal nuclear family, they will remain oppressed.

For Women’s Liberation Through Socialist Revolution

What is necessary is not a campaign against dirty pictures, but a struggle to build a base for working-class revolution. What is needed is a society in which domestic labour and child-rearing are not seen as an individual responsibility, carried out mainly by women, but rather a social process, for which society as a whole takes responsibility. This isn’t a “personal” matter which can be solved by men deciding to do more housework—we need free, twenty-four-hour childcare facilities and subsidised restaurants and laundries. But such enterprises are *impossible* in a society based on the profit motive. Only a society in which production is based on need and not profit can create the material conditions for an end to the oppression of women.

The battle against women’s oppression is not one of women against men. What is necessary is not a women’s organisation against pornography, nor women organised “autonomously” around any other list of “women’s issues.” Nor can women be organised on their own against capitalism: in the first place, some women are themselves part of the capitalist ruling class and, despite their oppression as women, oppose the creation of an egalitarian social order. Moreover, women cannot destroy capitalism and build a classless society on their own, but only through participation in a united revolutionary party of the working class, with a strong component which centres its activity in the struggle against the oppression of women.

Leninists have always sought to furnish “the most revolutionary appraisal of every given event” and to intervene “in every sphere and in every question of social and political life,” as Lenin argues in *What Is To Be Done?* (1902); Lenin even gave the example of the German Social Democrats intervening “in the matter of the law against ‘obscene’ publications and pictures.”

The vast majority of men would benefit from putting an end to a profit-based society too. The only force which has the potential social power—and the interest—to lead such a revolutionary overturn is the working class, both male and female. The working class must unite around a programme for the overthrow of this irrational and corrupt social system and its replacement by a new *socialist* order which provides women with what this society cannot: free childcare, free abortion on demand, relief from the crushing burden of domestic labour, and equal access to education, to jobs—to life itself. ■