

Feminist theories on porn: did pornography *kill* feminism? /

Teorias feministas em torno do pornô: teria a pornografia 'matado' o feminismo?

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Received 11 ago. 2026. **Aprovado:** 15 ago. 2026.

How to quote this article:

RIBEIRO, Luísa Neis. PAIXÃO, Kalita Macêdo. Feminist theories around porn: did pornography 'kill' feminism?. *Revista Letras Raras*. Campina Grande, v. 15, n. 2, e7700, sep. 2026. DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.22698359.

ABSTRACT

This article begins from the problem that much of the feminist literature on the *question* of pornography—a phenomenon that traverses women's sexuality deeply and particularly, both symbolically and materially—has, over time, been confined to the dichotomous “pro-sex” and *anti-pornography* perspectives crystallized in the U.S. sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s and in their legal-theoretical developments. These perspectives are insufficient to encompass the phenomenon's complexity and multidimensionality. The effort to map the theoretical positions on pornography established throughout the history of feminist epistemologies—and the main theoretical tensions that continue to structure the debate—is justified by the intrinsic need for these perspectives to remain in constant movement and renewal in the face of social, political, and economic changes that affect the experience of *being a woman*, in a broad sense, and, above all, women's experience of sexuality. The study conducts a qualitative, exploratory narrative literature review of a corpus of eleven works by eleven authors—including Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Carole Pateman, Gayle Rubin, Nadine Strossen, Wendy McElroy, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Amia Srinivasan—selected according to explicit inclusion and classification criteria. Its central hypothesis is that moving beyond the *pro-sex/anti-pornography* dichotomy and placing feminist disagreements in dialogue, rather than setting them against one another, makes a more precise and consistent interpretation of the phenomenon possible. The findings show that feminist currents, understood in their greater plurality—even though they often continue to diverge

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over porn—can critically integrate the material conditions of production and circulation, grammars of desire, and intersectional effects.

KEYWORDS: Feminist currents; Sexuality; Sexual economies; Exploitation.

RESUMO

Este artigo parte do problema de que grande parte da literatura feminista em torno da “questão” da pornografia, como fenômeno que atravessa tão profunda e particularmente a sexualidade feminina – no plano simbólico ou concreto – fora circunscrita, ao longo do tempo, às perspectivas dicotômicas “pró-sexo” e “antipornografia”, tal como se cristalizaram nas sex wars estadunidenses das décadas de 1970 e 1980 e em seus desdobramentos jurídico-teóricos, insuficientes para abarcar a sua complexidade e multidimensionalidade. Justifica-se o empenho empreendido em mapear os posicionamentos teóricos sobre a pornografia que se estabeleceram na história das epistemologias feministas – e as principais tensões teóricas que ainda hoje estruturam o debate – pela sua necessidade intrínseca de se manterem em constante movimento e renovação diante das mudanças sociais, políticas e econômicas que interferem na experiência do “ser mulher”, em sentido amplo, e sobretudo, na sua vivência da sexualidade. Procedeu-se a uma revisão narrativa de literatura, de abordagem qualitativa e fins exploratórios, sobre um corpus de onze obras de onze autoras – entre elas Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, Carole Pateman, Gayle Rubin, Nadine Strossen, Wendy McElroy, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks e Amia Srinivasan –, selecionadas segundo critérios explícitos de inclusão e de classificação. A hipótese central é a de que ao abandonar a dicotomia “pró-sexo/antipornografia” e articular as divergências feministas, e não as antagonizar, torna-se possível construir uma interpretação mais precisa e consistente do fenômeno. Confirmou-se que as correntes feministas, mais plurais – mesmo que ainda, por muitas vezes, divergentes em relação ao pornô – são capazes de integrar criticamente condições materiais de produção e circulação, gramáticas do desejo e efeitos interseccionais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Correntes feministas; Sexualidade; Economias sexuais; Exploração.

1 Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, pornography has been a controversial subject in feminist debates, particularly within English-language feminism in the United States. In the context of the so-called sex wars—the disputes that unfolded in the United States from the late 1970s through the 1980s—theoretical production on the subject expanded and contrasting positions became established. Since then, at least two opposing poles can be identified: so-called anti-pornography feminism, which holds that both the pornography industry and its consumption harm women’s rights, and pro-sex or sex-positive feminism, which argues that pornography is not, in itself, an obstacle to women and may even contribute to their liberation.

For Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, pornography reproduces and structures male domination by naturalizing sexual violence and objectifying women’s bodies. This view is shared in part by Carole Pateman (1988), who regards pornography as an extension of the “sexual contract,” that is, of the patriarchal legitimation of the appropriation of women’s bodies within liberal logic.

By contrast, theorists such as Gayle Rubin propose an approach more receptive to pornography. In *Thinking Sex* (2002), Rubin denounces the tendency of certain feminist sectors to reproduce moralizing discourses on sexuality and warns of the risks of a “tacit alliance” with

conservative groups. For Rubin and other “pro-sex” theorists, therefore, pornography is not feminism’s enemy; it can function as a field of dispute and resistance rather than merely as a mechanism of oppression. Authors in this field also present feminist pornography as a challenge to traditional pornography, which persists in subordinating women’s bodies through a repetitive, binary, sexist, and racist imaginary.

These divergences show that feminism does not understand pornography in a univocal way. Amia Srinivasan (2021) asks whether it had “killed” the movement, observing that women’s liberation in the United States, which had emerged with such force in the late 1960s, “within the space of a generation had become a fractured and worn thing” (p. 33). The debate oscillates between understanding pornography as a patriarchal technique of subordination and viewing it as a counterpoint to sexual repression and an exercise of freedom.

The point of departure, therefore, is that the reductive categories “pro-sex” and “anti-pornography” do not encompass the complexity of pornography or its effects on women’s sexuality. The objective is to map the positions formed within feminist epistemologies and the contemporary tensions among pornography, sexuality, and power. A delimitation of scope is necessary from the outset: what is examined here is neither “feminism” nor “pornography” in universal terms, but a historically situated dispute—the U.S. *sex wars* and their legal-theoretical developments in the United States—whose reception also shaped the Brazilian debate on the subject (Silva, 2023). Whenever this article refers to “feminist currents,” “women,” or “pornography” without qualification, it refers to this scope rather than to a universalizable experience. The article thus develops a literature review organized around an established dispute, not an exhaustive overview of the field.

The thesis defended here, which guides the reading developed in the following sections, is that “pro-sex” and “anti-pornography” work better as historical markers for organizing the debate than as rigid analytical keys, thereby avoiding reductionism. Feminist currents—plural and therefore often divergent in their approaches to pornography—can coexist productively when read through their internal fractures and their distinct legal, moral, economic, and cultural emphases. Such an articulation enables a critical integration of the concrete conditions of production and circulation, grammars of desire and the social formation of preferences, as well as pornography’s distributive effects across race, class, and gender, repositioning the debate beyond the censorship/liberation binary. The structure of the article follows this thesis: Section 2 explains the procedure and the criteria used to select and classify the works; Section 3 historically reconstructs the dispute and systematizes the positions in Chart 1; Sections 4 and 5 develop anti-pornography and “pro-sex”

formulations, respectively; Section 6 confronts the remaining axes of tension; and the conclusion returns to Srinivasan's question.

2 Methodological approach: selection and classification criteria

This is a basic, qualitative, and exploratory study that uses a narrative literature review as its procedure, combining a bibliographic survey with the subsequent categorization of results. It therefore does not claim to be a systematic or exhaustive review of the field—an undertaking made unfeasible by the breadth of feminist scholarship on sexuality—but rather a careful reconstruction of a delimited dispute: the U.S. *sex wars* and their legal-theoretical developments.

The survey combined bibliographic searches in Portuguese and English using terms related to feminism, pornography, the *sex wars*, and feminist pornography with backward citation tracking of references recurrently identified as canonical in the secondary literature. Because this is a narrative rather than a systematic review, no closed database of records or quantitative flow of results and exclusions was created; accordingly, the article does not report a total number of texts “found” or “rejected.” The numerically delimited set is the final analytical corpus, defined by the criteria set out below.

The inclusion criteria were: (i) feminist authorship presenting an explicit theoretical formulation on pornography, rather than a merely incidental reference to the subject; (ii) participation in the *sex wars* debate or its legal, theoretical, and political developments; and (iii) access to the full text in Portuguese, English, or an established translation. The following were excluded: (a) texts on prostitution or sex work that did not formulate a position on pornography; (b) journalistic or opinion pieces without conceptual development; and (c) works whose position was already represented by another work by the same author, thereby avoiding duplication.

The placement of authors in the categories of Chart 1 was based not on self-identification but on two criteria drawn from the texts themselves: the definition attributed to pornography—as a practice of subordination, a situated representation, or a legitimate expression of sexuality—and the legal-political response advocated—prohibition, civil liability, regulation, cultural reform, education, or non-intervention. The combination of these criteria produced three groups. The “anti-pornography core” comprises authors who understand pornography itself as a mechanism of subordination and formulate civil or restrictive responses; “other critical approaches” includes authors who examine its connections with contract, race, class, media, or the formation of desire without necessarily deriving a prohibitionist policy from that critique; and “pro-sex” designates

authors who reject an intrinsic equivalence between pornography and violence and emphasize sexual agency, reform of representation, or the risks of censorship.

Applying these criteria produced a final analytical corpus of eleven works by eleven authors. To make the classification verifiable, Chart 1 links each summary to a short excerpt from the corresponding work, selected because it condenses the thesis mobilized in the article without claiming to summarize the author's thought in its entirety. Where a cited edition is in Portuguese, the English translations of the excerpts are by the authors of this article; where the edition is in English, the original wording has been retained whenever available.

3 Pornography through feminist eyes (and theories)

The year 1972 marked a milestone in the history of the adult film industry: for the first time, a pornographic production was launched with major publicity and screened in prestigious movie theaters. The film was *Deep Throat*, which would later become a cult classic of the genre. Its star was actress Linda Lovelace—the stage name of Linda Boreman—whose character sought to achieve orgasm, something that, according to the plot, could occur only through performing oral sex on men because of an anatomical peculiarity.

At the time of its release, the film was widely interpreted as a celebration of women's sexuality. In keeping with this reception and reinforcing a narrative of personal empowerment, Linda Boreman published two books in which she described her participation in the feature film as an experience of freedom.³

Deep Throat remains one of the highest-grossing pornographic productions in history and was distributed internationally. In a review published in *The New York Times*, journalist Ralph Blumenthal quoted Gerard Damiano, the film's director and screenwriter, as saying that actresses entered the industry for pleasure, easy income, and because of "exhibitionistic traits." In his words, "the camera turns them all on" (Blumenthal, 1973, n.p.).

Against this account, Linda published a new autobiography in 1980 entitled *Ordeal*. In it, she stated that her then husband and manager, Chuck Traynor, had coerced her into appearing in the film, engaging in prostitution, and remaining in pornography, thereby contradicting the earlier version. This change in her account should not, however, be read merely as biographical

3 Before *Ordeal* (1980), Boreman published autobiographies that portrayed her work positively. She later stated that scenes had been fabricated under the control of Traynor and male co-authors (Bramasco, 2019).

inconsistency: it requires comparing the conditions under which each narrative was produced, who managed the actress's career, and which economic interests shaped her public voice.

The contrast between these accounts deserves more than the mere registration of a contradiction. The first two books are not properly Boreman's voice: they were produced under Traynor's management and with male co-authors, and the actress would later state that scenes narrated in them had been fabricated to meet public expectations (Bramesco, 2019). What they contain is less testimony than an extension of the pornographic apparatus itself: the persona "Linda Lovelace" continues to be written in the first person through the same male gaze that produced her in the film. By reversing this narrative, *Ordeal* does more than contradict the earlier works: it makes visible the conditions under which they were enunciated. Herein lies, in our view, the case's theoretical interest—Boreman's "consent" was publicly documented at every stage, and it is precisely this documentation that Pateman (1988) teaches us to read as the product, rather than the premise, of a structurally unequal relationship.

When Boreman made these allegations public, she was accompanied by radical feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, central figures in the critique of pornography as male domination and a violation of civil rights. Dworkin began developing this critique in *Woman Hating* (1974) and, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), defined pornography as a political institution that strengthens women's subordination.

MacKinnon, in turn, contributed significantly to the legal articulation of this critique. In *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (1979), she had already introduced the idea that certain sexual expressions in the workplace constitute sex discrimination. Later, in *Feminism Unmodified* (1987) and *Only Words* (1993), she argued that pornography institutionalizes sexual inequality and should be understood as a violation of women's civil rights because, as "protected speech," it promotes hatred of women and silences them, impairing the free exercise of their capacities in both public and private arenas.

Faced with harms such as those reported by Boreman, MacKinnon and Dworkin turned to law: instead of invoking obscenity or morality, they framed pornography as sex discrimination, objectification, subordination, and the normalization of violence—an obstacle to women's equality.

They therefore collaborated in drafting the *Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance* (1983–1985), a legislative proposal that sought to classify pornography as a form of sex discrimination giving rise to civil liability. The ordinance would have allowed women who alleged harm caused by pornography to sue producers and distributors. Its legal definition described pornography as the

sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words, associated with objectification, humiliation, pain, or violence (Dworkin; MacKinnon, 1988).

The proposal was approved in Minneapolis in 1983 but vetoed by the mayor. A version was adopted in Indianapolis in 1984; it was then held unconstitutional by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in 1985, a decision subsequently affirmed by the Supreme Court.

The rejection was grounded in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: according to the judges, the law sought to prohibit a type of speech—speech that subordinated women—because of its expressed content, thereby constituting viewpoint censorship. Even in defeat, the proposal intensified debates about sexuality within the feminist movements of the period and revealed the plurality of their perspectives.

Within this context of theoretical production and political activism associated with the *sex wars*, so-called *sex-positive* feminism adopted an approach more critical of censorship and more open to the diversity of sexual practices, including pornography.

It is important to note that the category “pro-sex” (*sex-positive*) was not coined by the authors themselves: it emerged from feminist debates on pornography in the 1980s as an analytical designation for feminists who rejected censorship and defended sexual freedom and bodily autonomy, including acceptance of pornography and sexual fantasies that radical feminist authors might regard as violent and inherently misogynistic, such as BDSM.⁴

In this context, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT), founded in 1984, brought together feminists who challenged the campaigns of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon and argued that censorship was not an appropriate path toward women’s emancipation. Their arguments were collected in the third edition of *Caught Looking* (FACT, 1992), which includes Duggan, Hunter, and Vance’s critique of anti-pornography legislation (1992). For the group, broad prohibitions threatened freedom of expression and sexual autonomy and could disproportionately affect women and minorities.

In the wake of this political and cultural mobilization, other academic and activist voices helped disseminate the concept of *sex-positive* feminism throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As editor of the collection *Pleasure and Danger*, Carole Vance helped consolidate a theoretical

⁴ BDSM refers to consensual practices of bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism.

approach that emphasized critical analysis of women's sexuality and integrated discussions of pleasure, risk, and agency in opposition to narratives of sexual repression (Vance, 1984).⁵

In her classic essay *Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality* (2002), Gayle Rubin—opposing what she herself calls “anti-pornography feminism”—and Carole Vance (1984) argue that sexuality is politically complex and that consensual practices, even controversial ones such as pornography or BDSM, may constitute forms of women's expression and pleasure.

In addition, authors collected in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (Taormino et al., 2013), including Susie Bright, broaden this perspective by discussing the production of feminist pornography and emphasizing women's agency, ethics in production, and the value of pleasure.

Within this strand, a prominent argument is that criticism of pornography should not be grounded in an external morality, but in the promotion of consent, diversity, and positive representations of women's sexuality, offering an alternative to the narrative of total oppression defended by radical feminism.

Applying the criteria set out in Section 2 to the surveyed corpus produced the categorization presented below. In addition to recovering the historicity of the positions that polarized the debate, the chart makes explicit the textual evidence used for each classification.

Chart 1 – Analytical corpus: strands, works, positions, and representative excerpts on pornography

Group	Author and strand	Reference work	Position summary	Representative excerpt
Anti-pornography core	Andrea Dworkin Radical feminism	<i>Pornography: Men Possessing Women</i> (1981)	Pornography is a political institution of subordination: its production and content transform women's degradation into male power.	“Male power is the <i>raison d'être</i> of pornography; the degradation of the female is the means of achieving this power” (Dworkin, 1981, p. 25).
Anti-pornography core	Catharine MacKinnon Radical feminism	<i>Only Words</i> (1993)	Pornography operates as sex discrimination: it produces subordination and silencing and can therefore give rise to civil liability.	“Pornography does not simply express or interpret experience; it substitutes for it” (MacKinnon, 1993, p. 25).

⁵ Vance writes: “The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women's lives. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice” (Vance, 1984, p. 1).

Group	Author and strand	Reference work	Position summary	Representative excerpt
Other critical approaches	Carole Pateman Feminist political theory	<i>The Sexual Contract</i> (1988)	Men's access to bodies must be understood in light of the sexual contract; consent cannot be separated from structural conditions.	"The original contract constitutes men's freedom and women's subjection" (Pateman, 1988, p. 6).
Other critical approaches	Patricia Hill Collins Black feminism	<i>Black Feminist Thought</i> (2000)	Pornographic representations can reactivate racist and misogynistic stereotypes; this critique does not, in itself, entail support for prohibition.	"The treatment of Black women's bodies [...] may be the foundation upon which contemporary pornography [...] is based" (Collins, 2000, p. 135).
Other critical approaches	bell hooks Black and socialist feminism	<i>Feminism Is for Everybody</i> (2018)	Pornography forms part of a patriarchal erotic disseminated by capitalism and the mass media.	"[...] patriarchal pornography now permeates every aspect of mass media" (hooks, 2018, p. 90).
Other critical approaches	Amia Srinivasan Intersectional feminism	<i>The Right to Sex</i> (2021)	Pornography reflects inequalities and participates in the formation of desire; the response requires criticism and education without reducing the issue to censorship.	"The hope it can be neutered through education doesn't take seriously enough the power it has—not as speech, but as film" (Srinivasan, 2021, p. 70).
"Pro-sex"	Nadine Strossen Liberal feminism	<i>Defending Pornography</i> (1995)	Freedom of expression and equality are not mutually exclusive values; broad prohibitions may disproportionately affect women and minority groups.	"Women should not have to choose between freedom and safety, between speech and equality, between dignity and sexuality" (Strossen, 1995, p. 15).
"Pro-sex"	Wendy McElroy Individualist and libertarian feminism	<i>XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography</i> (1995)	Defends women's right to pornography and rejects turning one particular reading of degradation into a universal definition.	Women's engagement with pornography may constitute "a rebellious process of self-discovery" (McElroy, 1995, p. 74).
"Pro-sex"	Gayle Rubin Sex-radical and queer feminism	<i>Thinking Sex</i> (2002)	Rejects sexual essentialism, the automatic equation of sex with violence, and the use of censorship against dissident sexualities.	"This anti-porn rhetoric [...] criticizes non-routine acts of love rather than routine acts of oppression, exploitation, or violence" (Rubin, 2002, p. 174).
"Pro-sex"	Ellen Willis Sex-radical feminism	<i>Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography</i> (2012)	Criticizes the displacement of feminist analysis toward moralism, its conservative alliances, and the risks posed to sexual freedom.	"[...] their focus has shifted from rational feminist criticism [...] to generalized, demagogic moral outrage" (Willis, 2012, p. 226).
"Pro-sex"	Annie Sprinkle Feminist pornography	<i>Dr. Sprinkle's Spectacular Sex</i> (2005)	Presents sexually explicit production as a field of experimentation, self-knowledge, and affirmative construction of pleasure.	"When it comes to your sex life, thinking of yourself as a victim usually doesn't help. [...] Think of yourself as an explorer" (Sprinkle, 2005, p. 42).

Source: prepared by the authors based on the delimited corpus (2026).

Note: for works cited in Portuguese-language editions, the English versions of the excerpts are translations by the authors; for editions published in English, the original wording has been retained whenever available. The passages were selected because they support the comparative summary, not as exhaustive definitions of the works.

This categorization makes it possible to identify and contextualize positions favorable to or critical of pornography and to make the textual basis of each approximation explicit. The categories

are neither fixed identities nor homogeneous blocs: Chart 1 distinguishes the anti-pornography core from other critical approaches and does not equate Collins, hooks, Pateman, or Srinivasan with necessarily prohibitionist positions. The excerpts provide evidence for the argument mobilized in the article, but they do not definitively reduce each author to a single current.

4 Feminist critiques of pornography

The feminists who developed the pioneering and forceful critiques of pornography from feminism's second wave onward are described in the academic literature as "anti-pornography feminists" (Boyle, 2014). Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon stand out among them for viewing pornography as a structured form of sexual violence against women.

Dworkin (1981) expresses her conviction that power, cruelty, sadism, and subordination are real, and she speaks of a "political crime" against women and an "atrocities" when addressing what porn represents for this social group. She calls the women's movement to action and demands an end to men's social power over women. She therefore understands pornography as real sexual violence: an institution that serves patriarchy, coerces women, and profits from their bodies against their will.

MacKinnon (1993), in turn, argues that pornography is a practice that causes real harm by subordinating women through degrading representations. Pornography operates above all by shaping what is considered "normal" in sex, naturalizing violent, degrading, and dehumanizing practices as though they were women's desires. The woman shown in the images frequently does not speak—she is portrayed as an available sexual object, happy to be violated. This transforms the public perception of women: she is not a speaking subject, but a mute body to be used (*ibidem*). This framing produces a silencing effect that impairs women's freedom of expression in public and private arenas and entails a loss of civil rights.

According to *Only Words*, this silencing effect is a mechanism of symbolic and practical domination, such that pornography should be understood not merely as representation or speech, but as a real act of subordination. MacKinnon states that "Pornography does not simply express or interpret experience; it substitutes for it" (1993, p. 25). Represented not as a subject with a voice but as an objectified and available body, woman is framed in a way that directly affects how she is seen and treated socially.

MacKinnon argues that, in the U.S. legal system, it is pornography whose freedom of expression is protected, not the women harmed by it. This creates the following paradox: “To protect pornography means to protect sexual abuse as speech, at the same time that both pornography and its protection deprive women of speech, especially speech against sexual abuse” (MacKinnon, 1993, p. 9). In other words, the right to “freedom of speech” has been appropriated by those who hold power—producers and consumers of pornography—and turned into a shield against liability for real harms, even when they include coercion, exploitation, and sexual violence, as in Linda Boreman’s account. Women who attempt to denounce them are, in turn, discredited: their speech is labeled “offensive,” “censorious,” “puritanical,” or “hysterical,” never legitimate. The silencing addressed by the author is therefore also legal and institutional: a woman who tries to narrate her experience of sexual violence encounters a barrier that invalidates her. Such silencing appears in workplaces and universities, where pornographic speech can create hostile environments while complaints are displaced into a debate about censorship and the perpetrator’s freedom. Politically, sexist ideologies reinforced by these representations would sustain inequalities in public, academic, professional, and media life.

As MacKinnon states (1993, p. 10), “there is a connection between the silence imposed on women, in which we seem to love and choose our chains because they have been sexualized, and the noise of pornography that surrounds us, passing as speech and parading under constitutional protection.” “Pornography is the law for women [...] It makes the world a pornographic place [...] defines what women are, how we are seen, how we are treated” (*ibidem*). In sum, MacKinnon understands pornography as presuming consent, making pain invisible, and converting women into sexual objects. Its silencing effect would be cultural, legal, political, and civil because it denies validity to women’s voice and humanity.

In *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman (1988) argues that liberal social contracts conceal male sexual domination. This domination is not a premodern remnant, but a foundation of political modernity: “The original contract constitutes men’s freedom and women’s subjection” (p. 6), the basis of modern patriarchal power (p. 2).

Pateman questions consent as a neutral foundation when choices are made under structural coercion. This domination extends to prostitution, pornography, and other forms of sexual commodification. If prostitution allows men to purchase access to women’s bodies (*ibidem*, p. 189), pornography represents and legitimizes the same logic by portraying women as always available and voluntarily submissive.

Pateman thus rejects the liberal conception that prostitution—and, by extension, pornography—are mere expressions of individual freedom or autonomous choice. The logic of contract conceals domination, especially when the agreement is concluded between structurally unequal parties. The central problem, therefore, is “women’s consent” within patriarchal structures. Choosing to participate in prostitution or pornography may conceal coercion, turning the material into a visual document of the sexual contract.

Intersectional feminists such as Amia Srinivasan and Patricia Hill Collins offer a more contextualized analysis of pornography by considering factors such as class, race, and gender. In *The Right to Sex* (2021), Srinivasan examines pornography as representation that reflects inequalities and also participates in the formation of desire, while questioning simplistic solutions such as censorship. In *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), Collins highlights the racialized exploitation of Black women’s bodies.

Black, Marxist, and socialist feminist authors such as Angela Davis and bell hooks locate sexuality and commodification within systems of economic and racial exploitation. In *Women, Race & Class*, Davis (2016) provides the historical basis for understanding the commodification of Black women’s bodies. In *Feminism Is for Everybody*, hooks (2018) criticizes the social normalization of sexual violence and the frequent association between sex and violence (pp. 85–86).

It is therefore apparent that, although radical, intersectional, and Marxist feminists share criticisms of pornography, their approaches differ significantly. Radical feminists view pornography as a direct form of sexual violence that must be eradicated and in which consent is, at the very least, compromised, whereas intersectional and Marxist feminists offer broader analyses that consider social, economic, and cultural factors. It is consequently inappropriate to group them under a single anti-pornography classification; their critiques reflect different diagnoses and proposals for action regarding pornography and its effects on women’s rights.

5 “Pro-sex” feminists

Within the scope examined here, while forceful criticism of pornography was historically and initially led by radical feminists, some “pro-sex” or “sex-positive” formulations are closer to liberal and individualist feminist theories. The more recent spread of *sex-positive* feminism is related to the greater public circulation of sex and sexuality, which are no longer primarily controlled but, on the contrary, permanently incited (Foucault, 1988).

This diffusion can be connected to social transformations through which sexuality came to circulate publicly as a language of identity, autonomy, and rights, in step with feminist achievements concerning sexual freedom, access to information, the expansion of debate on consent and violence, and recognition of plural forms of desire and gender expression. In an era marked by the centrality of media and the valuation of individual self-determination, discourses of empowerment associated with sexual experience tend to acquire greater cultural legitimacy.

Pro-sex feminism gained strength in the mid-1980s in opposition to anti-pornography campaigns. In “Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography” (1979, republished in 2012), Ellen Willis criticized the moralism and puritanism that, in her reading, threatened sexual freedom and freedom of expression; hence the designation “anti-censorship.”

Pro-sex feminists nevertheless agree with anti-pornography feminists in rejecting what they regard as an axiom: sexual essentialism, defined as “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions” (Rubin, 2017, p. 77).

Thinkers such as Gayle Rubin (1993)—whose work centered on sexuality studies and *queer* theory—argue that crucial distinctions are confused and obscured in anti-pornography discourse. According to Rubin, distinctions between sex and violence, image and act, harmless fantasy and criminal assault, and the sexually explicit and the explicitly violent were “hopelessly blurred” (p. 19),⁶ so that the words “violence” and “pornography” began to be used interchangeably.

Rubin (1993) observes that, in the history of the U.S. feminist movement examined here, feminists criticized sexism in multiple forms of media—film, television, literature, advertising, and others—and sought either to reform them or to create nonsexist alternatives. Pornography, however, was treated from an essentialist perspective: instead of being used to encourage the production of nonsexist or pro-feminist sexual materials, anti-pornography feminists demanded its elimination, including through legal means.

In *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women’s Rights*, Nadine Strossen (1995) challenges attempts at prohibition and the generalizations of the “MacDworkinites.” In her view, the anti-pornography crusade is more likely to suppress art than the hardcore market and, by weakening the First Amendment, harms women, artists, and minorities above all (Urofsky, 1995, p. 409).

6 The full passage reads: “Important distinctions, such as those between sex and violence, image and act, harmless fantasy and criminal assault, the sexually explicit and the explicitly violent, were hopelessly blurred. The words ‘violence’ and ‘pornography’ began to be used interchangeably, as though they were synonymous. Pornography was often simply equated with violence” (Rubin, 1993, p. 19).

Strossen (1995) accepts exceptional regulation when harm is proven, but considers MacKinnon and Dworkin's demonstrations insufficient. From a liberal perspective, she fears entrusting a paternalistic, anti-woman society with the power to define acceptable sexual behavior. She identifies a sexual or moral "panic" in anti-pornography politics, associated with the puritanical idea that sex necessarily degrades women. Her distinction between fantasy and reality does not deny the social effects of images, but it requires proof of harm and recognizes that violent content can acquire different meanings in the imagination.

Wendy McElroy (1995), likewise a feminist working within a liberal and emphatically individualist tradition,⁷ observes that groups of feminists—including some who work in the pornography industry⁸—have sought to defend pornography as harmless, pleasurable, and even entertaining. She therefore speaks of a "woman's right to pornography": pornography would not only be harmless to women, but would benefit them personally and politically.

McElroy attributes personal benefits to pornography, including sexual information, experimentation, reduced shame, and the questioning of stereotypes, as well as political benefits such as freedom of expression, protection for sex workers, and a possible cathartic effect on violent impulses (*ibidem*).

In constructing her individualist feminist defense of pornography, McElroy (1995) argues that feminism should be bold enough to suggest that sex can be fun and gratifying, fostering "a rebellious process of self-discovery" (p. 74). It is from this belief—in the possibility of using pornography in favor of sexual liberation rather than sexual correction—that feminist pornography emerges, answering modern feminism's demand for "a little less dogma and a lot more heresy" (*ibidem*).

Feminists working in pornography also began to participate in production and narrative formulation, expanding women's presence in positions of power and diversifying sexual representation. Feminist pornography seeks to break with a historically male field by emphasizing self-determination and autonomy (Santana, 2016); the hostility of this very environment is said to have motivated its creators (*ibidem*, p. 12).

In this way, *sex-positive* feminism recognizes sexuality as an element of political, cultural, aesthetic, and social expression and argues that feminist pornography, as an alternative to the

⁷ "Individualist feminists celebrate the diverse sexuality of individual women" (McElroy, 1995, p. 7).

⁸ The author points to contradictions in radical feminist theory: while radical feminists are committed to "validating" the experiences of women silenced by patriarchy, they deliberately dismiss the voices of women who choose to participate in pornography (*ibidem*).

mainstream, can subvert pornography's restrictive and degrading meaning for women and become a mechanism of self-determination. It thus brings pornography back into feminist debate as a key instrument in the dispute between sexual control and liberation.

Sex-positive projects seek to broaden the bodies, scripts, practices, forms of pleasure, negotiation of boundaries, and ethics of production represented in pornography. This project, however, confronts distribution chains, capital asymmetries, and patterns of consumption. The question remains whether aesthetic and narrative changes can disrupt hegemonic dynamics without materially transforming existing production and circulation.

6 Freedom and empowerment or exploitation and objectification? debates and perspectives

Feminist readings of pornography vary widely: they range from proposals to restrict the industry or hold it more strictly accountable for its effects on gender inequality to defenses of pornographic expressions committed to autonomy and diversity, understood as forms of sexual freedom and subjective and economic affirmation. This breadth cannot be explained only by moral disagreements, but also by different analytical emphases—sometimes directed toward the social structure of desire and representation, and at other times toward the material conditions of production, circulation, and consumption.

Even when they diverge in their diagnoses and solutions, different feminist strands converge on central axes, and it is precisely from this tension that a more contemporary and complex critical theory of pornography can emerge. Although the authors of this article have greater affinity with anti-pornography formulations, they recognize the theoretical limitations under which those formulations were historically forged. *Sex-positive* feminism therefore operates as an important methodological counterweight: it requires criticism to be refined, violence, exploitation, and coercion to be located more precisely—both where they are and where they are not—moral judgment to be separated from material analysis, and responses that confuse representation with practice or, crucially, treat “women” as homogeneous subjects to be avoided.

For Dworkin and MacKinnon, pornography also constitutes violence against women through its conditions of production, which may involve physical, psychological, or economic coercion (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1993; Dines, 2010). As sex work, it approaches prostitution in debates concerning vulnerability, power, negotiation of boundaries, and situated consent.

A second axis is the social formation of desire. Rubin (1993; 2002) distinguishes sex from violence, image from act, and fantasy from assault. Through different routes, hooks (2018) and Foucault (1988) make it possible to examine how subjectivity, power, and hierarchies structure desire.

The third axis is legal-political. Dworkin and MacKinnon shifted pornography from obscenity to discrimination, but encountered the barrier of the First Amendment (Dworkin; MacKinnon, 1988). Strossen (1995) warns of the disproportionate effects of prohibitions, while the institutional challenge is to avoid punitive moralism without excluding accountability, reparation, and protection against harm.

Finally, promises of freedom, pleasure, and income are unequally distributed. Collins (2004), Davis (2016), and hooks (2018) relate pornography, commodification, race, class, and gender. Analysis must consider who bears the costs and who has access to protection, moving beyond the censorship/liberation binary through material, symbolic, legal, and distributive criteria.

7 Conclusion

Returning to the question posed by Amia Srinivasan that is central to this article—whether pornography had “killed” feminism—the analysis suggests that pornography does not “kill” feminism, but exposes a constitutive fracture: the dispute over how to articulate sexuality, freedom, and equality without falling into moralism or dematerialized liberalism. Reconstructing the debate showed that the “pro-sex/anti-pornography” dichotomy was historically intelligible in the context of the sex wars, but is epistemologically too narrow to interpret so complex and multifactorial a phenomenon, whose tensions are further intensified and reconfigured by contemporary dynamics of monetization and networked circulation.

The analysis identified three recurring effects produced by maintaining the “pro-sex/anti-pornography” binary: (i) it displaces the debate into a moral dispute over being “for or against sex,” impoverishing analysis of pornography as an industry and cultural apparatus; (ii) it conflates analytical levels—criticism of representations, conditions of production, public policies, and technologies of circulation—as though they were equivalent; and (iii) it makes legal treatment of the subject more difficult by turning questions of labor, health, consent, violence, and civil liability into an abstract impasse between freedom of expression and gender equality.

From a theoretical standpoint, anti-pornography critiques offer powerful tools for naming pornography as a technology of subordination and rejecting the neutrality of “speech” when it produces harm and silencing. Conversely, *sex-positive* responses are decisive in denouncing implicit alliances with sexual conservatism and restoring agency, the plurality of desire, and the risks of state punitivism to the center of the debate. Intersectional approaches and the political economy of sex must reject both totalization—“pornography is always violence”—and abstraction—“pornography is only choice.”

In methodological and analytical terms, the principal finding is that an updated feminist reading of pornography should operate through axes of analysis made possible by the contributions of different feminist currents, moving away from a reductive dichotomous perspective. This makes it possible to (i) distinguish moral criticism from material criticism; (ii) recognize the ambivalence between pleasure and danger without denying the existence of harm; and (iii) open a path for legal and political responses that are neither censorious in principle nor indifferent to exploitation and violence. Rather than deciding whether feminism should be “for” or “against” pornography, it is necessary to construct precise diagnoses of the contemporary forms through which gender, market, and sexuality are dialogically constituted within sexual economies.

CRediT

Acknowledgement: Not applicable.

Financing: Not applicable.

Conflicts of interest: The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.

Ethical Approval: Not applicable.

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Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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