

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*: 40 years on

Sheila Jeffreys

Faculty of Arts, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Victoria, 3010, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 25 August 2010

SYNOPSIS

Kate Millett's book *Sexual Politics* was pivotal for the developing second wave feminist movement. It was regarded as very important both by feminists at the time and by the media. *Time* magazine labelled Millett as the Mao Tse-Tung of women's liberation, but the book is not as well known today as might be expected for a work that had such an impact. In this article I seek to remedy the neglect of *Sexual Politics*. I examine the problem of why her work has been buried and suggest that the main reason was the development of a pro-sex feminist politics in the academy. Millett demonstrated the importance of sexual practice in the subordination of women, she showed that sex was political. She showed how male left intellectuals of the 1960s wrote famous erotica which treated women as disgusting objects to be violated. She described many of the misogynist ideas in these works which have formed the stock in trade of the very profitable pornography industry which has developed in recent decades. I argue that her work should be seen as a progenitor of later anti-pornography campaigns and regarded with the respect accorded to other significant social theorists.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Forty years ago, in 1970, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* was published in the US. The book had an explosive effect on feminist politics at the time. It gained much media attention and brought the ideas of the emerging American feminist movement into the mainstream world, with prime coverage in *Time* magazine. But the book has not persisted in the historical memory of feminism, and is largely ignored in both social theory and scholarly feminist work today. In this article I seek to remedy the neglect of Millett's work. I argue that *Sexual Politics* is very important in laying the groundwork of radical feminist ideas, particularly in relation to the analysis of sex as political. Millett showed that sexual practice was constructed out of patriarchal power relations and both reflected and served to uphold male domination. She set out her understanding of the politics of sex through an examination of the ways in which male novelists of the 1960s, seen as progressive in their time, wrote about women and sex. Her analysis provides a foundation for the developing feminist critique of pornography.

Sexual Politics was written at a time before video pornography was invented. The industry of pornography at that time was based on magazines such as *Playboy*, and but a shadow of the highly profitable and mainstreamed industry of today. As the industry developed in the last quarter of the twentieth century the theorising of pornog-

raphy became much more developed with work such as that of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1993). I shall argue, however, that the ideas about women and sex in the 1960s novels by Norman Mailer and Henry Miller which Millett scrutinises so incisively lie at the foundation of today's industry, and contemporary feminist campaigns against pornography will be enriched by the knowledge of her work. I suggest some reasons for the way in which her work has been buried, such as the development of a 'pro-sex' feminism in the academy, and the way in which the post-structural turn in academic feminism has led to the privileging of male theorists whose work is hard to understand over the straightforward radical feminism of theorists such as Millett.

The importance of the book

Sexual Politics was out of print in the 1990s, although it is possible to acquire it today. Yet in 1970 the book created a shock to the political system of male domination, one that has been largely forgotten. Radical feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin wrote of the book: 'The world was sleeping and Kate Millett woke it up. Betty Friedan had written about the

problem that had no name. Kate Millett named it, illustrated it, exposed it, analysed it' (Dworkin, 2003). Dworkin continued, 'I cannot think of anyone who accomplished what Kate Millett did, with this one book. It remains the alpha and omega of the women's movement. Everything that feminists have done is foreshadowed, predicted or encouraged by *Sexual Politics*.' This assessment, by such a significant radical feminist theorist of pornography, is in sharp contrast with the way the book is currently treated in the feminist academy.

Millett's most significant advance was to politicize sex. The writers whose work Millett analyses were the stars of the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s. As Andrea Dworkin explains, 'When Millett wrote *Sexual Politics*, Miller, Mailer and Lawrence were the sages of sexual liberation' (Dworkin, 2003). They were 'primary influences on the generation that came of age in the 1960s' and for the left and the burgeoning counterculture, they were seen as subversive writers. In fact, Dworkin, argues, they helped to 'socialise a generation into believing that force and violence were valued elements of sex', but Millett's analysis 'destroyed their authority'.

The male sexual liberals of the 1960s proclaimed that the problem with 'sex' was simply that sexual freedom had been 'repressed'. There was little criticism of the way in which sexuality was constructed. Millett wrote from within a feminist movement in the US developing out of the left with outrage at the way that women were treated by the left, particularly as objects for sexual use (Shulman, 1980). The alternative press of the period, such as *Oz* and the *International Times*, promoted pornography as vital to sexual and somehow also, to political freedom (Jeffreys, 1990). They lauded the work of William Burroughs, for instance, a man who killed his wife whilst playing a game in which he shot at an object on her head (Jeffreys, 1990). Burroughs' novels are sexually violent, although generally with homoerotic themes, including fantasies of creating a world without women. Like those that Millett criticizes in *Sexual Politics* they were published by Grove Press which saw them as the harbingers of sexual freedom. Those women who came out of the left to find second-wave feminism were incisively critical of the misogyny of left males. For example, Robin Morgan attacked the misogyny of Left-hippie underground papers. Morgan wrote, 'We have met the enemy and he's our friend. And dangerous... A genuine left doesn't consider anyone's suffering irrelevant or titillating' (Diamond, 1980, p. 688). Andrea Dworkin explained, 'Leftist sensibility promotes and protects pornography because pornography is freedom' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 217). The decensorship of pornography was carried out as a project of the left, Dworkin explains, 'The new pornography is left-wing' but this will prove to be its deathknell, because, 'the new pornography is a vast graveyard where the Left has gone to die. The Left cannot have its whores and its politics too' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 217). The male novelists whose work was being rescued from censorship in the period, such as D.H. Lawrence, or published for the first time, like Miller and Genet, were seen as warriors for sexual freedom against prudery and conservatism. Sex was not political but only the 'repression' of it. Sex itself was seen as natural, biological, and wholly good.

Millett delivered a scathing feminist critique of this self-serving masculine folly. She argued that the subordination of

women is constructed through and in acts of penile penetration of women. She pointed out that sex is not 'natural', but politically formed, out of, and in support of, male domination. Millett's book examines the way sexual intercourse is written about by the self-proclaimed sexual revolutionary novelists of the 1960s in order to explicate the power politics they express. She explains, 'Coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum; although of itself it appears a biological and physical activity, it is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes. Among other things, it may serve as a model of sexual politics on an individual or personal plane' (Millett, 1971, p. 23).

In relation to the book's title, Millett explains that many would find it hard to see 'the relationship between the sexes', 'in a political light at all?' She, however, defines the term "politics" as referring to 'power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another' and patriarchy is one of these (Millett, 1971, p. 23). She states that the 'situation between the sexes' is one of 'dominance and subordination' which has created a 'most ingenious form of "interior colonization"', meaning that women often cannot see that they are oppressed because they are fully acculturated to that oppression, and may even defend the interests of the men who are their masters. 'Sexual dominion' she argues, is 'perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power' (Millett, 1971, p. 25).

Sexual Politics in the context of Millett's life and work

Millett published two non-fiction books on the politics of sexuality, *Sexual Politics* and *The Prostitution Papers* (1973). After the early seventies her attention turned to writing books on very different topics, and she was not actively involved in radical feminist politics in later decades. Kate Millett came from an Irish American family that was strongly political and aligned with the left. In the 1960s she was involved in anti-war and civil rights politics in the US (Hoffman, 1988). In the mid-1960s she joined the newly reborn women's movement, and in 1966 she became the chairwoman of the education committee of the National Organization for Women (NOW). She was 36 when *Sexual Politics* was published, which means she acquired her PhD, on which it is based, in her early 30s. In 1970 Millett was an artist and married to a Japanese sculptor. Her life at this time is documented in her third book, *Flying, in 1974*, in which she writes about how the publication of *Sexual Politics* and her wholesale involvement with feminism and the media, affected her life and relationship. Millett's lesbianism provided a focus for an emerging lesbian feminist movement. She had been a lesbian before her marriage and became so again at a time when lesbianism was understood to be a way of uniting personal and political, and was seen as progressive feminism in action. In 1977 Millett published a memoir about a lesbian relationship she had after her marriage, *Sita*, in which she details her emotional suffering in that unequally balanced affair. Both *Flying* and *Sita* were read by feminists like myself in the 70s, who were also choosing a lesbian life in consonance with our politics.

When Millett came out about her 'bisexuality' immediately after the publication of *Sexual Politics*, it caused a stir in the

media. Feminists marched in her support, with heterosexual feminists wearing badges saying they were lesbians on the grounds that they must not let lesbians be isolated (Abbot & Love, 1972). All feminists, it was reasoned, should be prepared to be assumed to be lesbians. In the 1970s the badge, 'How dare you presume I'm heterosexual', was commonly worn. Millett's only other book specifically relevant to feminist politics was *The Prostitution Papers* in 1973, which represents the dominant feminist understanding of prostitution at that time. She wrote that prostitution was, 'paradigmatic, somehow the very core of the female's condition', and reduced woman to 'cunt' (Millett, 1975, p. 56). Feminists in the 1960s and 1970s understood prostitution as a hangover from traditional male-dominant societies that would disappear with the advance of women's equality. Prostitution was, as Millett put it, a 'living fossil', an old form of slave relations still existing in the present (Millett, 1975, p.56). In succeeding decades this understanding of prostitution has been contested with many feminists changing their minds or developing more positive views of prostitution at the same time as neo-liberal economic forces have made the sex industry a hugely profitable global market sector (Jeffreys, 2009). Presently, many feminist academics who write on this issue do not condemn prostitution as a practice of male dominance, and some even argue that prostitution is legitimate work and expresses women's agency and choice (see for example: Agustin, 2007; Chapkis, 1997; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998).

After this period Millett's books were not specifically feminist or lesbian. She wrote a memoir about her mother, *Mother Millett* (2002), a book about torture, *The Politics of Cruelty* (1995), and others. Notably, in the 1980s, she wrote *the Loony Bin Trip* (1990) about her battles with what was called at the time 'manic depression' and is now called bipolar disorder.

Reception of sexual politics

Sexual Politics was a popular success, selling 80,000 copies within months, which is unusual for works of theory. The shock that the book created on publication is reflected in the fact that it was featured in *Time Magazine* in August 1970, with Kate Millett on the cover. The article comments, 'Until this year, however, with the publication of a remarkable book called *Sexual Politics*, the movement had no coherent theory to buttress its intuitive passions, no ideologue to provide chapter and verse for its assault on patriarchy' (*Who's Come a Long Way, Baby?*, 1970). Male readers were discomfited in particular, and it caused one of her thesis advisers, George Stade at Columbia University to remark, 'Reading the book is like sitting with your testicles in a nutcracker' (*Who's Come a Long Way, Baby?*, 1970). The *Time Magazine* article remarks, 'In a way, the book has made Millett the Mao Tse-Tung of Women's Liberation'.

The book was widely reviewed. Some of the reviews were very positive, describing Millett as 'brilliant' and 'impressive' (Poirot, 2004: p. 213), but the comments of the reviewers were frequently hostile and belittling. Many were personal and sought to degrade Millett. Irving Howe in *Harpers Magazine* called her a 'female impersonator' whose book contains 'phrases of a little girl who knows nothing about life'. Midge Dexter described her as having the 'problem' of a 'refusal to grow up'. Unfortunately Millett's sudden fame from the book's publication caused many of those feminists whose

support she might have counted upon to disown her in startling ways. Many movement feminists at that time were deeply suspicious of the media and of the idea of 'leadership'. There was often hostility to any woman who was seen by the media to be a spokeswoman for the movement, even when, as in Millett's case, her prominence was not sought but simply resulted from the publication of a book. At a meeting of Radicalesbians, of which Millett was a member, an anonymous leaflet was placed on chairs accusing Millett of 'fraudulence and greed' (cited in Poirot, 2004, p. 208). She was rejected by *Time* magazine when she came out as a lesbian, and by liberal feminists too, such as Betty Friedan, founder of NOW, who told Millett, 'You blew it!' (cited in Poirot, 2004, p. 210).

The politics of sexuality

Millett's methodology included scholarly analyses of the masculine biases of anthropology, sociology, economics and history, and showed familiarity with these literatures, but she found the meaning of sexual politics to be most clearly displayed in the sexually explicit novels of the day. She embedded her study of men's sex novels within the context of the operation of male power in the American academy and culture in 1970. She said, 'I have operated on the premise that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced' (Millett, 1971, p. xii). This is unlikely to be a fashionable view now, when looking for truth about sexual power relations in literature is likely to be viewed with suspicion in the academy (see for example Sonnet, 1999).

Millett's primary materials are the works of popular, and avant garde, male novelists that she sees as most clearly expressing sexual politics, i.e. the workings of patriarchy in their representation of sex. She analysed novels by D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, and Jean Genet, describing them as 'cultural agents' who shaped attitudes, and as 'counterrevolutionary sexual politicians' (Millett, 1971, p. 233). These men had hero status for many readers in the 1960s, and she was courageous to mount such a wide-ranging critique. Millett opened the book with three sex scenes, one each from Henry Miller's *Sexus*, Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* and Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal*. She explained the power dynamics in each scene. She included Genet in order to show that similar power dynamics, in which sexual practice involved masculine domination over a feminine other, were clear even in the way that the power dynamics of sex were described by a major homosexual writer.

The writers she criticises introduced scatological language to respectable literature. Their work is replete with the words 'fuck' and 'cunt'. To say 'fuck' in the 1960s was regarded by many people as a sign of liberation and progressiveness, as well as a transgressive act against the conservative values from which the avant garde sought to rescue a new generation. The significance of left-wing men saying 'fuck' is best represented by the use of the word by the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, author of 'Oh! Calcutta', in 1965. In a live debate on the BBC, he commented, 'I doubt if there are any rational people to whom the word 'fuck' would be particularly diabolical, revolting or totally forbidden' (Mullan, 1997, p. 121). Tynan was a darling of the left intelligentsia and a

self-styled sexual revolutionary who campaigned against censorship. Millett's analysis shows that the word 'fuck' is exciting to men because it is freighted with meanings of male power and the degradation of women. It is not an innocent word denoting sex, as can be adduced from the cruel excitement with which these novelists used the term. The word 'cunt' too, as used by such men, is not neutral, but a word that signals their contempt for women's genitals. The use of these words has often been confused with sexual freedom on the understanding that they are simply descriptive. Their use in the novels Millett analyses makes it very clear that they bear hostile masculine ideas about sex and women, and could not be easily taken up as women's language. Reading Millett's criticism of the male writers who use these terms so devastatingly raises doubts as to the efficacy of attempts by feminists to rehabilitate them in a culture in which they carry such misogynistic meanings.

The novels represent the underlying ideology of the sexual revolution, the misogynistic construction of men's sexual freedom and delight out of women's degradation. The authors saw themselves as knights jousting with the evil forces of prudery and censorship to liberate and tell the truth about sex. Mailer describes the battles of the publishers who were bringing out these novels, and their legal representatives in 50s and early 60s as being like the American Civil War. Mailer claims that the sexual revolutionary authors won the war: 'A war has been won. Writers like myself can now in America write about any subject; it is sexual, and we are explicit, no matter, the American writer now has his freedom' (Rembar, 1969, p. vii). Charles Rembar, lawyer for the publishers, Grove Press, laid out the marketplace of ideas doctrine, 'In the free interchange or ideas, the truth will emerge. "The best test of truth," said Justice Holmes, "is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market"' (Rembar, 1969, p. 12). Decensorship opened the floodgates for the pornography industry. Some publishers and defence lawyers using the defence of literary merit to defend these books, were well aware that their success would lead to the unleashing of literature that could not be seen as literary in any way, and have since defended straightforward pornography with no pretence of 'literary merit'. As Sheila Jeffreys wrote of the novels that formed the focus of these censorship battles, 'The script laid out in them was... the script that was largely followed in the 'sexual revolution' that was to follow. Attention paid to deciphering the sexual script set out here helps to clarify how 'sexual liberation' failed to be the liberation of women' (Jeffreys, 1990, p. 60).

The publisher of most of these controversial authors was Grove Press in New York, whose website today notes that, 'Grove's books have broken down sexual, cultural, and political barriers' (Website of Grove/Atlantic publishers). Grove produced books that the counterculture, those who considered themselves radical, were reading, books by Henry Miller, William Burroughs, Jean Genet, and Jack Kerouac. Most famously, in 1959, Grove published Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in its first unexpurgated, commercial edition. Many feminists at the time did not share Grove Press' understanding of its mission, and were angry at the misogyny that it promoted. Robin Morgan was arrested in 1970 for invading Grove Press on the grounds that 'Grove's sadomasochistic literature and pornographic films, dehumanize and degrade women' (Diamond, 1980, p. 688).

The work of D.H. Lawrence, and particularly *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, forms the first detailed section of literary criticism in *Sexual Politics*. Millett argues that Lawrence was responding to the women's emancipation movement of the early twentieth century. She sees him as putting women back in their place which turns out to be awed phallus worship. When Grove Press published *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, it became the subject of a censorship court case which was very significant. The book was judged to represent a new category of literature which, although lewd and scatological, had 'literary merit' (Jeffreys, 1990). The defence of 'literary merit' was then used to defend many other misogynistic books in the next decade. To demonstrate the religious motif of the book Millett quotes the description of the occasion on which Lady Chatterley first sees the gamekeeper's phallus:

"How strange!" she said slowly. "How strange he stands there! So big! And so dark and cocksure! Is he like that?"... "So proud!" she murmured, uneasy. "And so lordly! Now I know why men are so overbearing. But he's lovely, really. Like another being! A bit terrifying! But lovely really! And he comes to me!" (Millett, 1971, p. 239).

The gamekeeper replies with instructions to his penis on what he is after, i.e. cunt. There is a great deal more about 'cunt' in the book, with Lady Chatterley seen as simply 'cunt' i.e. "Best bit o'cunt left on earth" and 'Cunt! Eh, that the beauty o'thee, lass" (Millett, 1971, p. 239). Balls on the other hand are described as 'The roots, root of all that is lovely, the primeval root of all full beauty". Moreover, 'The root of all sanity is in the balls' (Millett, 1971, p. 240). Lady Chatterley needed to be rehabilitated by the penis, Millett explains, because her life was distorted by education and by being a modern woman. Anal penetration was particularly efficacious, because, as Lawrence puts it, 'she had needed this phallic hunting out, she had secretly wanted it, and she had believed that she would never get it' (Millett, 1971, p. 241).

Millett looks next at the work of Henry Miller, who also used the word 'cunt' prolifically. In *Sexus*, the 'sexual barriers' which his publishers saw as being 'broken down' by such novels are felled through the explicit description of the sexual degradation of a woman. In the novel the hero grabbed his hostess as she brought him towels for his bath, 'It happened so quickly that she didn't have time to rebel or even to pretend to rebel' (Millett, 1971: p. 180). He swiftly 'had her in the tub, stockings and all'. Ida's behaviour is described thus, 'She was just like a bitch in heat, biting me all over, panting, gasping, wriggling like a worm on the hook.' As a finale he 'made her stand up, bend over, then I let have it from the rear'. The script is straightforwardly pornographic. The woman is not really human and is manipulated for the man's excitement, 'She had a small juicy cunt, which fitted me like a glove'. For a finale the hero sadistically assaults her: 'I bit the nape of her neck, the lobes of her ears, the sensitive spot on her shoulder, and as I pulled away I left the mark of my teeth on her beautiful white ass. Not a word spoken' (Millett, 1971, p. 180).

Millett dissects the text, showing the cruelty it contains, behaviour that might in other contexts be described as sexual assault. The woman is treated as a servant and then grabbed and forced into sexual use, but she is avid for the abuse. This is a timeless motif of pornography. Millet explains that the

action is directed at a male reader and intended to cause him excitement from the exercise of masculine power. He gains, she says, 'a nearly supernatural sense of power' and is a 'case of sexual politics at the fundamental level of copulation' (Millett, 1971, p. 6). As Millett points out, Miller's hatred and contempt towards women are revealed very clearly in the way they are presented as non-human animals. He is horrified by women who show a sexual response, "The dirty bitches—they like it," he apprises us; clinical, fastidious, horrified and amused to record how one responded "squealing like a pig"; another "like a crazed animal"; one "gibbered"; another "crouched on all fours like a she-animal, quivering and whinnying"; while still another specimen was "so deep in heat" she was like "a bright voracious animal...an elephant walking the ball" (cited in Millett, 1971, p. 306). Miller explained elsewhere that he used sexual intercourse to relieve tensions: 'During intercourse they passed out of me, as though I were emptying refuse in a sewer' (Millett, 1971, p. 313). Millett explains that Miller 'gave voice' to 'certain sentiments that masculine culture had long experienced but always rather carefully suppressed'. These were, for example, 'the yearning to effect a complete depersonalization of woman into cunt' (Millett, 1971, p. 313).

This level of misogyny is evident in the work of the other sex novelists she analyses here. The book's opening quotation, from Norman Mailer's *The American Dream*, concerns a college professor who has just murdered his wife and is sexually abusing his German maid. He decides to bugger her against her will, based upon his interest in the smell of her anus. As in Miller's writings, a sexually aroused woman is presented as a disgusting non-human animal, in this case a sewer rat:

.... a thin high constipated smell (a smell which spoke of rocks and grease and the sewer-damp of wet stones in poor European alleys) came needling its way out of her. She was hungry, like a lean rat she was hungry, and it could have spoiled my pleasure except that there was something intoxicating in the sheer narrow pitch of the smell, so strong, so stubborn, so private, it was a smell which could be mellowed only by the gift of furs and gems (Millett, 1971, p. 11).

Anal penetration is an important method of teaching lessons to women and establishing power in these sex novels, as it is in the pornography industry of today.

Through her analysis of the way these sexual revolutionaries described women and sex, Millett provided the foundations for the feminist critique of mass market pornography which would develop from the mid 1970s. Irene Diamond credits Millett as the first feminist writer to argue that the sexual cruelty of pornography played a role in maintaining patriarchy (Diamond, 1980, p. 688). Millett, she says, 'first underscored' the 'primacy of power and violence in pornography'. But, most importantly, though 'Others before her may have noted the sadistic aspects of pornography', 'no one had linked sexuality and cruelty to the maintenance of patriarchy' (Diamond, 1980, p. 688).

There are instances, however, in which Millett's ideas about sexuality might grate with those of today's feminists

who are active in the struggle against male violence. Feminists in the early seventies were inspired by ideas of a potential paradise of sexual freedom, beyond patriarchal repression, and some thought that even incest could be rehabilitated. Millett takes such an approach in a 1984 piece, where she writes that 'incest' is problematic at present because of 'our social organization and its patriarchal structure', but that 'humanistic incest' might be possible in the future, because even sexual relationships between adults and children may not be 'completely wrong' (Millett, 1984, p. 223). She can, she says, 'think of thousands which might be delicate and interesting'. This point of view is at odds with the experience of those who work against violence against women and children, and suggests a naivety about power relationships that might seem surprising in someone whose analysis of power in relation to sex is otherwise so refined, but it fits into the predominantly sexual libertarian perspectives of the day.

Another example of Millett's concern with sexual freedom is the fact that she was a signatory of the Fact Brief which opposed the anti-pornography approach of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. Kate Millett was one of a number of feminists including Diana Russell, Gloria Steinem and Susan Brownmiller, Alice Walker and Robin Morgan, who wrote an unpublished letter to *Time Magazine* in 1985 in support of the civil rights approach to pornography exemplified in the ordinance created by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. This approach used civil law to empower women hurt through the making or distribution of pornography to act against its producers. In opposition a group of feminists created the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce in 1985 to organize against the anti-pornography ordinance. It seems contradictory that Millett became a signatory to the Fact Brief which FACT produced. Catharine MacKinnon comments, in explanation, that many who signed onto the Brief appeared not to have read it (MacKinnon, 2007, p. 530). It may also be an indication that, by the mid 1980s, Millett had not been involved in feminist debates about pornography for some years and was unfamiliar with what the 'sex wars' of the time were about. In 1970 she was a pioneer of anti-pornography politics, but by the 1980s these politics had developed complexities that she had not kept up with.

The contemporary pornography industry

By reading *Sexual Politics* it seems very clear that the womanhating ideas Millett analyses in the books of the 60s male novelists are now the stock in trade of the burgeoning pornography industry. When Millett wrote the book, pornography was still an underground industry which the male leaders of the counterculture and the sexual revolution were struggling to derepress. But Millett's comment on the womanhating sex novels of that time is very apt to express the effect of the subsequent unleashing of the pornography industry. In relation to Henry Miller she wrote, 'To provide unlimited scope for masculine aggression, although it may finally bring the situation out into the open, will hardly solve the dilemma of our sexual politics' (Millett, 1971, p. 313). That 'unlimited scope for masculine aggression' is now evident in the scale and scope of pornography.

At the time that Millett was writing, the industry was in its infancy. The VCR had not been invented. *Deep Throat* was not released until 1973. In that movie Linda Lovelace Marciano, a woman with clear bruises upon her body from the handiwork of her violent pimp/husband, swallows a penis whole on the premise that her clitoris was in her throat (Lovelace, 2006). It was seen by many people as the movie that democratised porn. Pornography was still understood, in 1970, as the preserve of socially inadequate men in raincoats who frequented dirty movie theatres. Reading *Sexual Politics* today makes it clear that the misogynist sentiments and patriarchal construction of sexuality that Millett criticises so incisively, are the lentils and potatoes of the profitable, contemporary, global pornography industry.

The size and worth of the pornography industry in the present, and the extent to which it has been mainstreamed into the day to day business of major corporations and into the entertainment, music and fashion industries (Jeffreys, 2005, 2009), should immediately cast doubt on any notion that pornography is 'transgressive', though this is an idea that its liberators in the 1960s embraced, and to which defenders today still cling. Laura Kipnis, an American media studies academic, states, for example, that pornography is 'transgressive, disruptive, and hits below the belt' (Kipnis, 2003, p. viii). In fact the industry is now covered seriously in the business pages of newspapers. Pornography companies, such as Beate Uhse from Germany, are listed on the Stock Exchange. According to research carried out for the IT industry website *Top Ten Reviews*, in 2007 there were 4.2 million porn websites which constituted approximately 12% of all websites, and 420 million web pages of pornography (*Top Ten Reviews*, 2007). Internet sales of porn were estimated to be worth \$4.9 billion. By country, the largest number of pornography webpages originated in the US, 244,661,900, followed by Germany with 10,030,200, UK with 8,506,800, Australia with 5,655,800, Japan 2,700,800, The Netherlands, 1,883,800, Russia 1,080,600, Poland, 1,049,600, and Spain 852,800. In Denmark pornography is estimated to be the third biggest industry in financial terms. The number of hardcore pornography titles produced increased from 1300 in 1988 to 12,000 in 2004 and 13,588 in 2005 (*Top Ten Reviews*, 2007). The big mainstream pornography distribution companies have considerable incomes. Playboy earned 331,100,000 USD in 2006, for instance and Beate Uhse earned 271 million USD.

The sexual ideology of the industry is identical to that of the revolutionary left intelligentsia which wrote the sex novels of the 60s. The obsession with anal sex, with women as 'sluts', desperate to receive violent punishment from men, is evident in the reviews of porn titles provided on the website of Adult Video News, the online magazine of the US porn industry. One representative 2010 movie, in which 12 women are anally penetrated, is summed up thus, 'The vaginas stay fresh but the asses are destroyed in this epic anal adventure'. The women prepare each other to be brutalized by the male actors, and engage in a practice that is now common in pornography of taking penises in their mouths which have been used to anally penetrate other women:

Ridiculously long and perpetually filthy, *American Anal Sluts* is one of the best photographed anal movies ever, with excruciating detail given to all five sex scenes and

homage played to all 12 asses that get plowed Jennifer White and Kiera King lick each other's assholes and use spit as lube, with Jennifer sliding Kiera's soft round ass onto Adriano's cock. A harsh anal fucking ensues with his cock going from Kiera's tush into White's mouth and back into her asshole. The roles are reversed, with an amazing and realistic double anal pounding where Kiera ends up licking Adriano's cum off Jennifer's ass and then sharing it with her.... Amy Brooke pours honey into McKenzie Myles' huge gaping anus and uses a speculum later to get it ready for Mike's cock. After some extremely well-shot deep throat blowjob action captured from below, both girls have their assholes ripped to shreds, with plenty of A2OM (ass to other mouth) for good measure (*Adult Video News*, 2010).

Millett argues in *Sexual Politics* that the womanhating sex rants of the 60s were a response to the changing relationship between the sexes. Following that logic, we would have to understand the extraordinary vigour of the pornography industry today as a response to the considerable advances that women have now made.

The burial of *Sexual Politics*

Despite its importance in providing a theoretical basis for second wave feminism, Millett's work is generally excluded from the canon of significant social theorists. She is unlikely to feature in edited collections or on university courses. I consulted a website on *Social Theory* which listed 32 thinkers of whom only one was a woman, Harriet Martineau. I looked at who was included in some recent significant readers on social theory. *Readings in Social Theory: The Classic Tradition to Postmodernism* (Farganis (Ed.), 2003), contained 37 pieces, only two by women, Dorothy Smith and Michele Barrett, but no radical feminists and certainly not Millett, although she is arguably a great deal more famous than the women who are included. *Social Theory: A History*, edited by Alex Callinicos, has no women mentioned in the contents, only men. *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings* (1998) contains quite a few women at least, a dozen or some out of many dozens of men, but none are radical feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly, Catharine MacKinnon or Kate Millett. The question of how thinkers enter the canon and make it into the ranks of social theorists or political philosophers of significance is an important one. We need to understand how Kate Millett, as well as other radical feminist theorists, get left out. The omission of Kate Millett is not accidental, but an effect of the operations of power. Even feminist collections are likely to leave out her work. Thus *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, from 1997, though it includes pieces from 37 theorists, even including a couple of radical feminists, does not include Millett (Meyers, 1997).

There is no scholarly book about Kate Millett, and no biography of her. A search of the Amazon website reveals that there are 17 scholarly tomes available about the theorist Judith Butler, however. Interestingly enough a 2007 volume on Judith Butler is advertised in the Polity Press catalogue with a quotation from Steven Seidman which says, 'For students and faculty struggling to understand Judith Butler, I

strongly recommend this book' (Lloyd, 2007). There is no need for commentaries explaining the work of Kate Millett, because her writing is pellucid, but the level of obscurity of a theorist's work cannot fully explain the degree of respect in which it is held. It is important to ask why Kate Millett's work has been treated so differently by the academy. Millett's work, like that of other feminist writers of the 1970s whose ideas inspired a movement, such as Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Germaine Greer (1971), has been repudiated by academic feminists in the intervening decades. Ann Snitow's comments on these women's work demonstrate the virulence of that rejection (Snitow, 2004). In reference to the 'early writings of the second wave', she says, 'I can't think of a recent example of anyone reading these texts without immediately consigning them to the dustbin of history for their now well acknowledged racism, false universalism, essentialism, and homophobia. (My students, for example, rebel against reading Kate Millett or Anne Koedt or the Redstockings Manifesto, considering these outgrown and better forgotten)' (Snitow, 2004, p. 22). Even supposing these accusations had any foundation in respect of early feminist texts, there must surely be such flaws in the work of male theorists, such as Freud, Marx and Foucault, who are still cited and anthologised decades after their deaths and not regarded as 'better forgotten'. The excoriation of Millett requires further explanation.

Two processes are likely to have been at work in the burying of *Sexual Politics*. One is what has been termed the feminist 'sex wars', the furious disagreement in the 1980s over pornography and sexual practice (see Jeffreys, 1990). The other may relate to the effects of the movement of feminism into the academy, and the process by which feminist theorists increasingly took up the work of male theorists such as Foucault, or other women who adopted the frameworks of these men, and rejected the embarrassingly clear and troublingly political work of radical feminists, whose work was usually not accepted as 'theory' at all. The 'sex wars' took place between feminists who took an anti-pornography position, and those who defended pornography, either from a free speech point of view, or because they accepted the sex it portrayed as expressive of sexual freedom, or as simply what sex is, rather than an expression of male domination. The latter labelled themselves 'pro-sex', and the anti-pornography feminists 'anti-sex'. Ann Snitow, for instance, has positioned herself on the 'pro-sex' side in the 'sex wars' (Snitow, 1984). The 'pro-sex' forces won this battle, probably because their views were much more amenable to the mainstream media and to the male-dominated academy. Also the forces of neo-liberalism helped to create a powerful sex industry, which was able to promote a pro-pornography, or 'pro-sex', ideology. *Sexual Politics* is likely to have suffered from being identified as 'anti-sex' because of Millett's profound critique of the sexuality of male dominance.

Linda Williams, who teaches 'porn studies' (Williams, 2004) as an ordinary part of the college curriculum, concentrating on plotting and photography and such important matters, demonstrates the way in which Millett's work became unacceptable. She states that 'our current sexual politics' can no longer be 'that begun by Kate Millett and continued by anti-pornography feminists' (Williams, quoted in Sonnet, 1999, p.167). This is because such politics

'condemns' the 'masculine 'other' and 'feeds all too easily into the condemnation of the deviant sexualities of 'perverse others'. 'These perverse others', Williams maintains, have now taken their place as 'authoritative subjectivities, both explicit and erotic, on the scene of sexual representation'. Thus, she considers, 'the anti-pornography feminist reification of vilified masculinity backfires as a strategy for the furtherance of feminist goals'. So, precisely the forms of male sexual behaviour that feminists have criticised have now become the 'authorities', the dominant voices in sexual culture, and the feminist critics, have, in this reading, been completely vanquished. It may be that there is less interest in the work of losers, such as Millett, than in those of the winners in this battle.

Millett's work is likely also to have suffered neglect in the feminist academy because it does not fit the criteria for what constitutes 'theory'. It is interesting that the work of feminists like Millett who criticised male theorists rather than stressing the usefulness of their work to understand the oppression of women, has sometimes been misunderstood as not really theory at all. Thus Chris Weedon, in a book that provides an introduction to poststructuralist feminist theory, states that radical feminist theorists reject 'theory', 'many feminists maintain an active hostility to theory... Others, particularly influential radical-feminist writers like Mary Daly and Susan Griffin, see it as a masculine form of discourse which maintains male dominance by co-opting women and suppressing the feminine' (Weedon, 1987, p. 6). Real theory is done by men, as Weedon explains, 'The theories which have helped produce poststructuralism include the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Emile Benveniste, Marxism, particularly Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, and the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. They also include Jacques Derrida's theory of "différance" (Weedon, 1987, p.13). Weedon comments that 'It is no coincidence that these theorists are all men'. This is because of 'gender relations' that 'structured women's absence from the active production of most theory' and 'is a mark of the particular conditions under which prestigious and powerful bodies of knowledge were and are produced'. There were, however, plenty of radical feminist theorists writing when Weedon's book was published, such as Millett, Mackinnon, Dworkin, and they somehow escape her notice. Instead, Weedon tells us, there is a 'tendency' on the part of feminists to 'to reject theory' because of 'the impenetrability of many important texts for women without privileged access to higher education and by the fact that most of the theorists who have produced poststructuralist texts are themselves unsympathetic to feminism' (Weedon, 1987, p.13). Misogyny might be considered a good reason for seeing some men's texts as unhelpful for feminism, but not in Weedon's view.

Radical feminist Carol Ann Douglas (1996) explains how she discovered that radical feminist theory is not accepted as theory. She says,

In reading some post-modern feminist theory, I made the shocking discovery that some academic feminists think that there are two kinds of feminist theory. Apparently, feminist theory that directly tries to discuss specific subjects such as violence against women is "low" theory,

while theory that is about other theory and that draws on the ideas of men such as Michel Foucault is “high” theory. If that's the case, then you take the high road, baby, and I'll take the low road, and I'll be in Scotland... (Douglas, 1996, p. 417).

Douglas offers, in explanation, that what she thought was feminist theory, that is, ‘the works of Adrienne Rich, Mary Daly, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Catharine A. MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and virtually everybody else who has ever moved women’ is considered ‘low theory’ because it is ‘much too close to how ordinary women think, no matter how elegant its language, to be the most serious kind of theory’ (Douglas, 1996, p. 417).

For Weedon, and other poststructuralist theorists, it is men who write theory, and if they are French and hard to understand, then so much the better. The masculine academy privileges the theory of men. Referencing is a political act which also serves to establish the canon. It demonstrates the obedience of writers to the authorities of their discipline and serves to give their work credibility by showing their respect for these figures. Feminist academics who reference the work of men who have status in the academy at a particular time, such as Foucault in the recent past for instance, may find it easier to be successful, to build publications and to progress in their careers. As feminist academics seek to fit their work into the frameworks that male theorists, often with no interest in or actually hostile to feminism, provide, they are tamed. Somer Brodribb explains that this process depoliticizes feminism (Brodribb, 1992). Referencing Millett, or even Catharine MacKinnon, will not garner respect in the academic world, and may indeed be a surefire way to discredit the work of an early career academic.

The clarity of Millett's work is likely to have worked against it being taken seriously in the present. The post-structuralist turn introduced the idea that there was a huge complexity involved in literary criticism. Readers, for instance, could occupy a range of ‘subject positions’ so that one straightforward interpretation of a writer's words would be overly simplistic. Thus Esther Sonnet writes rather dismissively of what she sees as old-fashioned feminist literary criticism that understood male writers to be possessed of a ‘male gaze’ in their work (Sonnet, 1999, p. 183). She explains that ‘current research by poststructuralist feminist, lesbian, gay and ‘queer’ theorists demonstrates the inescapably heterocentric terms of ‘male gaze’ theories, I would argue they are not even equipped to address the intricate negotiations of heterosexual subjectivities transacted in the act of reading which invokes a wholly different register of subjective positions within sexual fantasy scenarios’ (Sonnet, 1999, p. 183). According to such criteria Millett's interpretations of the work of male sexual freedom novelists in the 1960s must be seen as simplistic, rather than full of profound feminist insight.

Conclusion

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* has been undeservedly swept to the sidelines or relegated to the dustbin of outdated theory, even by many other feminists. Those who speak dismissively

of her work, and of the need to bury it, are often enthusiastic about the work of male theorists who demonstrate no feminist insight, but who, like Millett, also wrote decades ago. *Sexual Politics* should be accorded respect as a most important progenitor of second wave feminism and the origin of many of the ideas that came to be taken for granted, at least by radical feminists. Even those who disagree with the book's contents should be able to recognise its significance. It would be a cause for celebration if the message of *Sexual Politics* were out of date, because this would mean that there had been a positive change in sexual culture. Millett believed that the feminist movement that was burgeoning when the book was published, would sweep away the kind of misogyny she documents. Unfortunately the opposite has taken place: the misogynists won, and a massive global industry of pornography, embodying precisely the sexual ideology men such as Miller and Mailer promoted, is now worth billions of dollars for corporations and for organized crime. In the postscript to *Sexual Politics* Millett comments on the feminist movement that is growing in the US. Encouraged by its strength and vigour she writes as her last line, ‘It may be that we shall even be able to retire sex from the harsh realities of politics, but not until we have created a world we can bear out of the desert we inhabit’ (Millett, 1971, p. 363). In the twentieth century sex has not been retired, but remains centre stage in the maintenance of male domination. This makes *Sexual Politics* a crucial reading now for a new generation of feminist activists and scholars.

References

- Abbot, Sydney, & Love, Barbara (1972). *Sappho was a right-on woman: A liberated view of lesbianism*. New York: Stein and Day.
- Adult Video News (2010, accessed 15/06/2010). Review of: American Anal Sluts. <http://www.avn.com/movies/95639.html>.
- Agustin, Laura (2007). *Sex at the margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*. London: Zed Press.
- Brodribb, Somer (1992). *Nothing mat(t)ers: A feminist critique of postmodernism*. Melbourne: Spinifex Press.
- Chapkis, Wendy (1997). *Live sex acts: Women performing erotic labour*. New York: Routledge.
- Diamond, Irene (1980). Pornography and repression: A reconsideration. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5 (4), Women, sex and sexuality. 686-701.
- Douglas, Carol Ann (1996). I'll take the low road: A look at contemporary feminist theory. In Renate Klein, & Diane Bell (Eds.), *Radically speaking: Feminism reclaimed* (pp. 417–420). Melbourne: Spinifex.
- Dworkin, Andrea (1981). *Pornography: Men possessing women*. London: The Women's Press.
- Dworkin, Andrea (2003 14 July) Great thinkers of our time – Kate Millett. *New Statesman*, <http://www.newstatesman.com/200307140019>.
- Firestone, Shulamith (1970). *The dialectic of Sex: The case for feminist revolution*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Greer, Germaine (1971). *The female eunuch*. London: Paladin.
- Grove/Atlantic (n.d. accessed 10/3/09). Grove/Atlantic Press website. <http://www.groveatlantic.com/grove/default.htm>.
- Hoffman, Merle (1988, accessed 15/06/2010) Interview with Kate Millett. Breaking the barriers: Merle Hoffman interviews Kate Millett. On The Issues. Volume 10. http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1988vol10/vol10_1988_4.php.
- Jeffreys, Sheila (1990). *Anticlimax: A feminist perspective on the sexual revolution*. London: The Women's Press.
- Jeffreys, Sheila (2005). *Beauty and misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the West*. London: Routledge.
- Jeffreys, Sheila (2009). *The industrial vagina: The political economy of the global sex trade*. London: Routledge.
- Kempadoo, Kamala, & Doezema, Jo. (Eds.). (1998). *Global sex workers: Rights, resistance, and redefinition*. New York: Routledge.
- Kipnis, Laura (2003). *Bound and gagged: Pornography and the politics of fantasy in America*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Lemert, Charles (1998). *Social theory: The multicultural and classic readings*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Lloyd, Moya (2007). *Judith Butler*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lovelace, Linda (2006 1st published 1980). *Ordeal*. New York: Citadel Press Inc.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. (1993). *Only words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. (2007). *Women's lives, men's laws*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press.
- Meyers, Diana Tietjens (Ed.). (1997). *Feminist social thought: A reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Millett, Kate (1971). *Sexual politics*. London: Hart-Davis.
- Millett, Kate (1975). *The prostitution papers*. London: Paladin.
- Millett, Kate (1984). In Carole S. Vance (Ed.), *Beyond politics? Children and sexuality. Pleasure and danger. Exploring female sexuality*. (pp. 217–224) London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul.
- Millett, Kate (1990). *The loony bin trip*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Millett, Kate (1995). *The politics of cruelty*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Millett, Kate (2000 1st published 1974). *Flying*. Illinois, USA: University of Illinois Press.
- Millett, Kate (2002). *Mother Millett*. London: Verso.
- Mullan, Bob (1997). *Consuming television: Television and its audience*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Poirot, Kristan (2004). Mediating a movement, authorizing a discourse: Kate Millett, sexual politics, and feminism's second wave. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 27(2), 204–236.
- Rembar, Charles (1969). *The end of obscenity*. London: André Deutsch.
- Shulman, Alix Kate (1980). Sex and power: Sexual bases of radical feminism. In Catharine R. Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person (Eds), *Women, Sex and Sexuality*. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5 (4), and 6 (1) (pp. 21–86). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Snitow, Ann (1984). *Pleasure and danger*. London: Routledge.
- Snitow, Ann (2004). *Theory love/hate. The Women's Review of Books*. <http://www.wellesley.edu/womensreview/archive/2004/12/highlt.html>.
- Social Theory (accessed 15.06.2010). Social Theory Pages: biographies. <http://www.socialtheory.info/biographies.htm>.
- Sonnet, Esther (1999). 'Erotic fiction by women for women': The pleasures of post-feminist heterosexuality. *Sexualities*, 2(2), 167–187.
- Top Ten Reviews (2007, accessed 15/3/2010). Internet Pornography Statistics. www.toptenreviews.com/pornography.
- Weedon, Chris (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Who's Come a Long Way, Baby? Time Magazine, 31 August 1970, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,876783,00.html>.
- Williams, Linda (Ed.). (2004). *Porn studies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.