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PREVIEW

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**Burkean identification in Conservative Christian and feminist
antipornography rhetoric**

VerLinden, Jay G., Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1990

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PREVIEW

BURKEAN IDENTIFICATION IN CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN
AND FEMINIST ANTIPORNOGRAPHY RHETORIC

by

Jay G. VerLinden

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
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Under the Supervision of Professor Jack Kay

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1990

DISSERTATION TITLE

Burkean Identification in Conservative Christian

and Feminist Antipornography Rhetoric

BY

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BURKEAN IDENTIFICATION IN CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN
AND FEMINIST ANTIPORNOGRAPHY RHETORIC

Jay G. VerLinden, Ph.D
University of Nebraska, 1990

Adviser: Jack Kay

This study used Kenneth Burke's theory of identification to examine the language used by feminist and Conservative Christian antipornography critics to discover if they shared dialectic substance enough to form a unified rhetorical community. The Conservative Christians were represented by Donald Wildmon and Neil Gallagher while the feminists were represented by Andrea Dworkin and a variety of other rhetors. The research found the rhetoric provided little basis for unity and far more opportunity for division. Strategic identification is undermined because of the discrepancy of terms used by each community to describe themselves. While both communities describe themselves as loving, correct, knowing, and angry only the Conservative Christians describe themselves as leaders, sincere, concerned, decent, good, involved, persistent, balanced, supportive, human, healthy, naive,

unknowlegable, unimpressive, fearful, in the minority, and tempted. The feminists describe themselves as tender, intuitive, aware, brave, oppressed, and filled with self-hatred, despair, and anguish. Antithetical identification is avoided because the two groups portray their enemy in significantly different ways. To the Conservative Christians, pornography threatens their way of life and the social order, causes harms ranging from lust to murder, lies about society, perverts unsuspecting observers and is used by perverts and addicts. The subjects in pornography are prostitutes with abberent physical characteristics and pornography is, itself, sexual abuse. Feminists portray pornography as a threat to needed social change, and as a tool used by the oppressor that endangers, degrades, and exploits all women. Unnoticed identification is prevented by the differences in the metaphors and myths upon which the two communities rely. Conservative Christian metaphors include disease, pollution, addiction, height, growth, light and dark, engulfment, and freedom while feminists use metaphors of decay and burden. Both use a consumption metaphor but in significantly different ways. Feminist rhetoric makes use of a malevolent male myth while Conservative Christian rhetoric uses myths of supernatural forces and inevitable progression. Both communities use a powerful media myth, but the nature of media power is different for each community.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PORNOGRAPHY CONTROVERSY AND BURKEAN IDENTIFICATION

On May 20, 1985, President Reagan announced the creation of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, charged with the mission to "determine the nature, extent, and impact on society of pornography in the United States, and to make specific recommendations to the Attorney General concerning more effective ways in which the spread of pornography could be contained" (Attorney General's Commission 215). The commission held hearings, solicited testimony, visited pornographic stores, and deliberated for a year before releasing its findings on July 6, 1986. While the Commission worked many observers believed the very existence of the Commission and the testimony it generated signaled the unification of feminists and Conservative Christians in a dangerous attack on freedom of expression in the United States. For some time pornography had been viewed as "good clean fun (or at all events, good dirty fun), a lighthearted badge of liberation and advanced thought" (Carlin 599); but that badge was endangered because "feminist antipornographers now find themselves in a tacit but uncomfortable alliance

with right-wing and religious crusaders who also denounce pornography as our worst modern vice" (Elshtain 17).

The appearance of the unified stand was both surprising and troubling for many observers. Karen DeCrow, the former president of the National Organization for Women, noted the result was a "novel alliance Although neither side likes to acknowledge it, the Far Right . . . and some feminists have agreed on a draconian plan to ban sexually explicit materials" (96). Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz provided a civil libertarian characterization of the Conservative Christian and feminist alliance when he noted:

By focusing their wrath on "pornography," feminists who advocate censorship have made their Faustian pact with the devil--the Reverend Jerry Falwell and his gang of fundamentalist censors. Although there is little reliable evidence that nonviolent pornography--explicit depictions of couples making love--causes violence against women, these feminists have decided that the only way of putting together an effective censorship coalition is to agree with fundamentalists that pornography is the villain. (Dershowitz 22)

Along with Dershowitz, those who defend the availability of pornography feared the two separate rhetorical

communities--feminists and fundamentalists--would form one larger rhetorical community and successfully impose limits on everything the two communities found objectionable.

True unification never did materialize, however. Although the two communities seemed to have a common cause, they made little effort to form an alliance and become a strong socio-political force. An explanation for that failure can be found in an analysis of the antipornography rhetoric created by members of each group. The analysis in this dissertation shows that the way Conservative Christians and feminists talk about themselves and the way they talk about pornography are so different that there is little basis for unity. Moreover, their rhetoric provides many cues to remain separate communities.

In the following chapter I summarize the stands taken by the feminist and Conservative Christian antipornography communities and the evidence that they failed to form an effective movement. I then describe Burkean identification, which is the critical perspective taken to study the rhetoric, and review previous scholarship concerning identification. I also review previous studies of feminist and Conservative Christian rhetoric to determine what has been discovered about their means of identification. Finally, I explain how the antipornography

rhetoric was studied and what will be covered in the rest of the dissertation.

Feminists and Moralists vs Pornography

Pornography seemed to be the ideal issue to bridge the gap separating feminists and Conservative Christians. Both communities are opposed to much of the same physical material: photographic and verbal depictions of human sexuality, particularly material that displays women. Members of each community are extremely emotionally involved in their opposition to the availability of sexually explicit materials which they believe promote a value system dangerous to each community's ideology. Members of each community also shared some of the same actions, such as picketing stores in their attempts to limit the distribution of pornography. Representatives of each community also introduced legislation designed to restrict the images that could be legally distributed.

Although the two communities agree on the need to eliminate pornography, they do not agree on the reasons. The feminist objection is based on the observation that pornography advances a myth that "women are biologically suited to function only as breeders, pieces of ass, and servants" and pornography "does not only sanction violence . . . it incites it" (Dworkin, "Pornography: The New

Terrorism" 216). The feminist anti-pornography rallying slogan is "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice" (Morgan 139). Prior to the empanelment of the Attorney General's Commission, the feminist conception of pornography, as propagated by attorney Susan Brownmiller and activist Andrea Dworkin, led to consideration of anti-pornography ordinances in Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Des Moines, Los Angeles, and Suffolk County, New York. Those ordinances were based on the idea that pornography violates women's civil rights by depicting women in a way that encourages harassment and physical abuse ("Minneapolis Passes Pornography Ban," Press et al., Sheinfeld, Blakely, Downs).

The Conservative Christians oppose pornography because it "perverts and sickens the moral nature of boys and girls" (Falwell 76). Like the feminists, the Christians had also been actively opposed to pornography for several years, creating organizations such as Morality in Media and Citizens for Decency, with missions to rid their communities of "ugly, sick, maniacal, savage, lust-addicted" pornography (Gallagher 12).

Failed Unification

If these two rhetorical communities, representing powerful political forces of the right and the left,

consolidated their efforts there was a real chance that the government would have taken steps to effectively curtail the open availability of sexually explicit books, magazines, and video tapes. Although civil libertarians feared the results of such a union, an effective coalition failed to materialize. In the years following the release of the commission's findings there have been no united declarations against pornography, no jointly sponsored national programs calling for the removal of pornography, and no significant shared appearances to motivate further efforts to eliminate pornography. In the years following the Attorney General's Commission's findings there has been no widespread success at either enacting new antipornography legislation nor more vigorously enforcing existing legislation at either national or local levels. The major success seems to be limited to the well publicized removal of Playboy and Penthouse from certain convenience store shelves; an outcome credited exclusively to the religious right.

In fact, while Conservative Christian anti-pornography spokesmen generally ignore the feminists, some feminists have taken positions that explicitly oppose any coalition with religious forces. Other feminists oppose efforts to suppress pornography and actively denounce the findings of the Attorney General's Commission. When the Commission's

findings were made public, pioneering feminist Betty Friedan spoke out

to express my view, on behalf of a great many women in this country, feminists and believers in human rights, that this current move to introduce censorship in the United States in the guise of suppressing pornography is extremely dangerous to women. It is extremely dangerous to the rights of women as well as men to speak and think freely and to fight for our basic rights, to control our lives, our bodies, and have some degree of economic and political equality. (42)

Feminists in Maine went so far as to campaign against the moralists to defeat a proposed anti-pornography statute ("A Porn Ban Fails"). Although feminists and moralists may have a common enemy that fact has not translated into the establishment of a rhetorical community encompassing both groups.

The irony of the two groups, which oppose each other on so many issues, working towards the same apparent end is interesting. The failure of the coalition to materialize and create a common rhetorical community, however, is worthy of more attention. The potential for a powerful political allegiance that apparently would advance

the cause of both groups remains unrealized. Part of the explanation for the failure lies in the rhetoric used by each group in their attempts to attract followers and attack their enemies. Antipornography rhetoric provides a rich drama for examining the way rhetoric can both invite people to join a cause while at the same time prevent others--who are interested in the same results--from joining forces and acting together. Kenneth Burke's theory of identification provides an ideal perspective to examine the drama.

Critical Perspective

The examination of anti-pornography rhetoric calls for a critical approach that emphasizes the community building function of rhetoric, since the question is "Why was a rhetorical community, comprised of both Conservative Christians and feminists, not formed?" The nature of the problem suggests the use of Kenneth Burke's theory of identification as a critical method. Identification theory explains how language can create the sense that different people have something in common that binds them together in a community based on rhetoric. The theory also explains how rhetoric can emphasize differences to prevent the formation of a rhetorical community. Kenneth Burke's theory of identification is applied to feminist and

moralist antipornography rhetoric to determine why identification did not occur and why a unified rhetorical community did not come about. Burke's theory will be used to examine the strategies each group selects to characterize themselves and those who agree with them, to characterize pornography and the people who support pornography, and to provide unnoticed cues to maintain distance from the other anti-pornography group.

Justification

An analysis of the functioning of identification and division in the contemporary antipornography campaign proves worthwhile for three reasons. First, the analysis provides a rhetorical explanation for the failure of the two groups to present a truly united front in opposition to pornography. This analysis allows critics to go beyond merely saying either, "They've joined forces to oppose pornography," or, "Feminists and religious fundamentalists just do not like each other so of course they didn't unite." An in depth analysis of the rhetoric presents a much fuller explanation of this phenomenon. Moreover, this dissertation provides an explanation for each anti-pornography community's failure to attract more feminists and Conservative Christians to the cause.

Second, the analysis contributes to a better

understanding of the rhetoric of both feminists and Conservative Christians. What each community says about pornography cannot be divorced from what they say about other issues, so an examination of their rhetoric will add to the limited critical literature about each group that already exists. This study illuminates both communities' conceptions of what the world is like, how they fit into that world, and how that world threatens their communities.

Third, this dissertation adds to our knowledge of the workings of Burkean identification. This is the only study to date that compares the rhetoric of two groups to determine how they actually do--or do not-- "speak the same language," which Burke says is the basis of all persuasion. This study also analyzes the role language plays to unintentionally invite identification and division. Unintentional identification is an important aspect of Burke's theory of identification that has been virtually ignored and this dissertation contributes to a fuller understanding of that aspect of Burke's theory.

Identification Theory

The concept of identification can seem deceptively simple because the term can be understood in so many senses. Dennis Day notes that "Burke uses the term in two fundamentally different senses: identification of and

identification with" (Kenneth Burke and Identification--A Reply" 416). People participate in the identification of themselves and others when they attach labels such as "I am a student" or "he is a teacher." In a similar way people also identify others as belonging in the same classification, such as, "Bush and Quayle are both Republicans." On the other hand, people identify with others when they recognize, consciously or unconsciously, their commonality with the others. When discussing identification one must determine which sense of the term is being used.

The different meanings of the term "identification" is not the only potential source of confusion in Burke's theory. Burke's statement, "To identify A with B is to make A consubstantial with B" can also be read two ways (A Rhetoric of Motives 21). Person C could identify A with B by observing them and recognizing their commonality (identification of), or A and B could identify with each other by sensing real or imagined commonalities. Although the different readings are possible, Burke is clearly most concerned with the act of A and B identifying with each other. The central issue in identification is, "How do people use rhetoric, in all its varied forms, to create the sense of commonality necessary for persuasion and the formation of rhetorical communities?"