

## 'Taking social responsibility - the anatomy of resistance'

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Some words about myself; I am an historian and working on a PhD-thesis on the 1970s women's movement in France and Norway. I compare similarities and differences between the struggle against sexual exploitation and violence against women in these two countries.

This lecture is partly based on my ongoing research on these movements but I will focus on the Norwegian women's movements struggle against pornography and prostitution in the 1970s and 1980s.

My starting point for studying these movements is a bottom-up perspective. That is, I see progressive social changes in society as resulting from collective mobilising and organising by ordinary people. (A typical example is how the welfare arrangements are outcomes of the struggle by the labour unions.)

I have been asked to talk about 'Taking social responsibility - the anatomy of resistance'.

"Taking social responsibility" – it is hard to find a more typical characteristic of women's movement than that. Since the first collective women's organising back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, taking social responsibility has been the primary task and concern of the women's organisations. And then I don't mean 'social responsibility' only in a broadly defined way, as struggling for equality between men and women; for women's rights to education, employment, property, and of course for the right to vote and political representation – but taking responsibility for organising welfare arrangements that we now, at least in the Nordic countries, consider to be governmental responsibilities: health care, education, daycare for small children... women's organisations used to be socially and practically responsible for that kind of welfare arrangements on a voluntary basis, that is, they most often were not paid but based on solidarity with other women.

And, in addition, women's movements have, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, taken social responsibility through international campaigns against slavery and prostitution.

When women's movements are 'taking social responsibility', they generally meet resistance. Not only when organising against prostitution, pornography and other 'moral' questions, but even when women gather to work for the improvement of their community, as campaigning for the building of a daycare centre – they meet resistance. Very often they are labelled 'man haters'. This is an old way of trying to delegitimize women's political demands.

Feminist researchers have pointed out that when women organize themselves politically as a group, men are, involuntarily, also made a group that is forced to acknowledge that gender affiliation has political significance. This means, for example, that men (as a group) must take responsibility for other men's bad behavior.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the resistance against women's

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<sup>1</sup> Recommended reading to theories about resistance against women's organisation (for those who read Swedish) is: Holmberg, Carin (1996): *Det kallas manshat. En bok om feminism*. Göteborg: Anamma Böcker

separate organising become particularly aggressive when they engage in questions concerning sexuality, when women organise in order to restrict men's access to sexually available women, when they challenge the sex industry.

Of course, the intensity of resistance varies across time and place, and is connected to women's position in society. Also in Norway, women fighting against pornography and prostitution are often labelled prudish "Puritans" and "hostile towards sex" (*seksualfiendtlige*). However, Norway is probably one of the easiest places to organise as women. The resistance has been weaker than in other countries. Quite a lot of men have actively supported women's demands: In the early 1980s, the women's movements' view on pornography and prostitution as oppressing women, as violence against women, became widely accepted in society. The reference book on Norwegian history of ideas from the Middle Ages until year 2000 (*Norsk idéhistorie*, 2003), it is even claimed that the radical women's movements' view on pornography as violence against women became hegemonic in Norway in the 1980s: "The sex liberal (*seksualfrisinnede*) voices were missing in the debates. Everyone now agreed that pornography was oppressing women. The debate on pornography was no longer about sexual freedom and erotic play but about prostitution and violence."<sup>2</sup>

I do not fully follow this analysis; the "sex liberal" voices were far from silenced, but the important here is that what was *perceived* to be a hegemonic discourse on pornography.

Nonetheless, when I have been asked to talk about the "anatomy of resistance", it is the resistance against the sex industry I should talk about. Let's go back to the 1980s.

By the mid 1980s the movement against pornography and prostitution (or P&P as it was branded on stickers and badges) had grown so strong it was impossible to ignore its demands;

In 1985 porn was an important election issue: all political parties except from the then small and negligible Progress Party, were explicitly against pornography. The same year, a new law against pornography was approved. The most important, however, was the change in people's attitudes towards pornography. For sure, pornography did not disappear all together, although it sold less than in the 1970s – but pornography was discussed everywhere, thousands of people had taken a stand against sexual exploitation and dared to protest.

The movement against porn and prostitution<sup>3</sup> consisted of around 40 organisations, and some 400 000 people, which at the time meant ten per cent of the population! Local shop owners played a vital role in the movement: Hundreds of shop owners refused to sell pornographic magazines, and the movement against p&p made stickers that shop owners that refused to sell porn could stick to the entrance: "The movement against p&p honour this shop for not selling porn". This kind of campaign even spread to cities and municipalities: "This is a porn-free city"!

What relevance has this success story about this Norwegian movement against pornography and prostitution from 1980s for this conference?

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AB; Höjer, Maria Wendt og Cecilia Åse (1999): *Politikens paradoxer. En introduktion til feministisk politisk teori*. Lund: Academica Adacta AB; Edwards, Maud (2002): *Förbjuden handling : om kvinnors organisering och feministisk teori*. Malmö: Liber.

<sup>2</sup> Hompland, Andreas (2003): "Det feminiserte Norge", *Et lite land i verden. Norsk idéhistorie* bind VI (red. T. Berg Eriksen and Ø. Sørensen). Oslo: Aschehoug, p. 284.

<sup>3</sup> The name of the movement was "Fellesaksjonen mot porno og prostitusjon" – "The Joint Action Against Porn and Prostitution".

Firstly, pornography and prostitution are closely connected. Pornography is by definition a part of the prostitution industry as far as it shows people that are paid for having sex in front of a camera. Besides, pornography glorifies prostitution.

Secondly, as a resistance movement the Norwegian movement against P&P has a lot in common with the organiser of this conference, the 8<sup>th</sup> of March Initiative. The struggle thus have a parallel in the Danish struggle against prostitution.

But aren't Norway and Denmark so different from each other? Isn't Norway such a Puritan country which is incomparable with "sex liberal" Denmark?

When the campaign against pornography started in Norway, so-called cultural radicals had a strong position in public debates. Many radical people publicly defended pornography as liberating. The supporters of pornography were strong and had lots of resources, some of course had economic interests in maintaining the sex industry. Those who criticised the sex industry were accused of being Puritan and hostile towards sexuality. However, the movement against pornography succeeded in changing the dominating attitudes towards pornography. How did this happen?

The movements against pornography and prostitution started in the late 1970s as a women's movement against pornography.

What do I mean with women's movement? My definition of women's movement is when women act and organise collectively *as women* in order to change and improve women's lives in society. This broad definition includes all kinds of women's organisations, whether housewives' associations, farmer women's organisations, Christian women's organisations, professional women's organisations or political women's rights organisations. They necessarily don't have to be feminist organisations, but feminist women's groups are of course part of the women's movement, as well as non-organised women who feel they belong to the movement. In the movement against pornography and prostitution, feminist activists were leading, both regarding activities in political actions, as well as in the understanding of pornography and prostitution as violence against women.

The women's movement, and the movement against pornography and prostitution are social movements. Social movement research is a broad academic research field, and I will only give a very brief summary of what we are talking about when we talk about social movements:

- A social movement is not the same as an interest organisation.
- A social movement is a collective organising for changing society – challenging power structures, protesting against the established culture, its values, norms, attitudes, and practices.
- Social movements have goals (e.g. a society without the oppression of women – bringing the sex industry to an end)
- Social movements interact with potential allies, with elites, with "ordinary" people, and, of course, with opponents.
- Social movements usually have clearly defined enemies. Such enemies may be diffuse as "Patriarchy", "capitalism" or "globalisation" but can also be more clearly defined as the "sex industry" or the local brothel.
- Social movements have strategies (more or less conscious) which implies how actions are carried out, as well as with whom to cooperate.

- Social movements produce knowledge and meaning (broadly defines as a way of understanding the world).
- For a social movement to survive it is vital that the participants feel they belong to the movement, that they have a collective movement identity. To create solidarity it is important to have fun in the movement as well!

The movement against pornography and prostitution that succeeded in changing the mainstream attitude to the sex industry as oppressing women started on the initiative of the women's section in the agrarian Centre Party, in 1977. At this time it only concentrated on pornography. At the time prostitution was a marginal and hidden phenomenon in Norway. But soon feminist researchers put prostitution on the agenda, and feminist activists started their actions of outing sex buyers. In 1981, the fight against prostitution was included in the movement. The movement against pornography (and prostitution) included everything from radical feminist women, Christians, liberals, communists, socialists... women's organisations, youth organisations, non-organised women, and, as time went by, also political parties. However the women's movement played the leading role. Activists from the women's movement took the initiative; and run most of the activities and actions. The movement was, in my view, indeed very similar to the 8<sup>th</sup> of March initiative.

The movement was triggered by an event that got a lot of media attention (social movements are often triggered by a 'moral shock', to develop into a social movement however, they need to find resonance in society – in this case, the women' movement was strong):

In August 1977 two young women that were temporary employees in the subway of Oslo were discharged for having torn down advertising posters for a so-called "men's magazine" on the subway. Fate would have it, however, that the discharged temporary employees were feminists with good connections in the women's movement. A committee consisting of all the feminist and women's rights organisations were set down in support of the temporary employees. Two demands were stated; that they should get back their job, and that advertisements discriminating against women should be forbidden. After a lot of demonstrations, open meetings, collections of signatures etc, both demands were accomplished (more or less).

Most important, however, was that the event triggered direct actions against the sex industry. During the autumn of 1977 activists that were connected to the women's liberation organisation Women's Front started to burn pornographic magazines in public. The "porn bonfires" (*pornobål*) were organised as follows: women entered a sex shop, brought with them as many pornographic magazines they could carry with them in plastic bags, brought them with them outside, tearing gasoline on them and making a bonfire. To the crowd that gathered to watch the scene, the action was explained through flyers and speeches in megaphone. These actions got a lot of media attention, of course. Many people supported the "porn bonfires"; other thought this kind of action reminded of the Nazis' book burning in 1930s' Nazi-Germany. At the same time, the owners of the sex shops organised and attacked the women activists in different ways.

These events in 1977, I believe, were important reasons why pornography came up on the political agenda.

But how come that it develop into a broad social movement? I believe these features were important:

- That the movement succeeded in mobilising around common claims and demands, among these were:

- No to the sale of the female body.  
Ban advertisements that discriminate against women advertising and advertising for porn.  
Yes to sex education, no to pornography.  
No to pornographic exploitation of lesbians and other sexual minorities.
  
- The political actions played on a wide repertoire of contention: familiar actions such as demonstrations, collection of signatures, open meetings and information campaigns were combined with spectacular “guerrilla” actions such as “porn bonfires” and, in the 1980s, also direct actions against sex buyers. Less tough minded anti-porn activists could combat the sex industry by ordering goods from their stores under false names. Porn magazines and inflatable sex dolls accumulated, unclaimed, at post offices and cost the sex industry a lot of money.
  
- Broad alliances and pragmatic cooperation with people and organisations feminists usually don’t cooperate with, such as religious women
  
- Clear defined enemies: an advantage that the sex industry’s representatives in the public debates were unsympathetic gangsters
  
- The movement’s production of knowledge: Most people did not know what pornography was like and broad information campaigns were organised in order to show people what pornographic magazines actually contained, accompanied with feminist analysis. Slideshows where porn was showed, analysed and discussed were held not only for women and people that were already convinced, but in typical male dominated workplaces as the offshore oil industry, in military camps, in Rotary clubs, as well as in schools, youth clubs etc... An important breakthrough happened when the national broadcast sent a TV program where the most famous anti porn activists performed. People all over the country started to discuss pornography and taking a stand.

Finally, I believe it is important to emphasise that social movements have a particular position in Nordic countries compared to more centralized countries

- The tradition of grassroots movements, (*Folkebevægelse*) and close links between grassroots movements and elites in the state: Bottom-up pressure
  
- That these popular grassroots movements often have been consensus oriented searching agreement across the political spectre (*tverrpolitisk*)

To conclude, I would like to express how impressed I am over the work of the 8th of March Initiative. The situation in Denmark in 2011 is certainly different than in Norway in the 1980s (and today, for that matter). Here, you have to cope with the “sex liberal” Danish self image. The opponents of the anti prostitution movement is stronger and more diverse than in Norway, and finally, the women’s movement is less active than in the 1970s and 1980s.

However, if you keep up the good work you have already started, I believe you will manage to gain widely support for your demands. Your strength, in my opinion, is the broad alliances you have managed to make, combined with clearly expressed demands.

Thank you for your attention!

