

H-Net Reviews

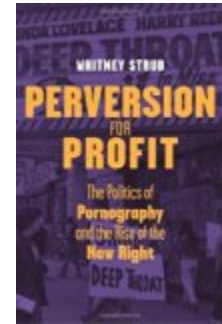
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Whitney Strub. *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 382 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14886-3; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-14887-0.

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For Want of a Nail, A Shoe Was Lost

For his first monograph, Whitney Strub has taken on the project of explicating a source of power and popular support for the nascent New Right in the 1960s and 1970s that historians have thus far underemphasized. Key conservative figures, Strub argues, recognized the growth potential in mobilizing those elements of the “silent majority” particularly distressed by the seeming moral degeneracy of the sexual revolution, including the proliferation of pornography in the United States. Leaders of the New Right exploited the issue through shrill propaganda that capitalized on what Strub sees as Rooseveltian liberalism’s logical inconsistency on sexual matters: civil libertarians who in almost every other way supported an expansive free-speech agenda nevertheless conceded during these critical decades the low constitutional value of sexual speech and behavior. This concession by mainstream civil libertarians amounted to “an Achilles’ heel the New Right has stabbed at to great effect since the late 1960s” (p. 2). By outlining these developments, Strub hopes to extend into the post-World War II period the work on obscenity in the Progressive Era already begun by Andrea Friedman in *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909-1945* (2000). He offers not only a scholarly but also a social-policy warrant for this effort: if we want to understand why, to borrow Steve Seidman’s phrasing (in the title of his 1992 monograph, *Embattled Eros: Sexual Politics and Ethics in Contemporary America*), Eros remains embattled even today, after decades of sexual revolution and a broadening of the notion of free speech, we must recognize the skill

with which the New Right modernized the Comstockian toolkit of sexual regulation.

This is a plausible and interesting line of argument, and there is no mistaking the passion and purpose with which Strub applies himself to what must have been a Herculean slog through the papers of Rightists whom he most certainly does not admire. Also immediately apparent in these pages is Strub’s commitment to writing history that his students can understand. Although he does not confess it as his goal, it seems clear that he hopes to transmit his ardent defense of freedom of sexual expression to young minds who can carry it forward, both within and beyond academia. I applaud his intention to speak plainly at a time when Wagnerian circumlocution often clogs the academic presses.

A quick inspection of Strub’s curriculum vitae reveals him to be a polymath who is no stranger to ambitious undertakings, from completing multiple majors as an undergraduate to publishing an impressive string of journal articles in the years just prior to the release of *Perversion for Profit*. Other reviewers have commented on the unusually complete array of sources that he examined in the course of his research for this dissertation-turned-monograph. So Strub’s dual project of explaining New Right modernization while at the same time providing a synthetic narrative of the post-World War II history of the social and legal dimensions of obscenity is of a piece with the scale of his other academic ambitions. Thus, it

pains me to say that in the work under review, Strub may at last have overreached his extraordinary abilities. To successfully balance the conflicting demands of view-from-above synthetic narrative while attempting to plumb the depths of a vast collection of primary sources requires considerable experience as a writer, and the luxury, not generally available to junior faculty, of extensive rewriting and re-rewriting. It appears that in the resulting manuscript, the demands of narrative generally won out over the conflicting need for careful deliberation of evidence and method, with the result that *Perversion for Profit* suffers from an uneven and generally inadequate explanatory framework that undermines Strub's efforts to realize the potential of the primary evidence that he has gathered.

His strongest chapter treats the historical significance of the grassroots membership organization Citizens for Decent Literature (CDL). Here, the pace of the narrative slows sufficiently to allow Strub to treat nuances and develop a human portrait of his main character. He recognizes the public relations genius of founder Charles Keating, who, beginning with his public pronouncements in the mid-1950s, distinguished his organization from older forms of "decency" advocacy that had become associated in the popular press with the censorious tactics of America's fascist and Communist enemies. In his public posturing, Keating declared his purpose to be that of promoting moral mass media within the constitutional framework of obscenity then emerging in the Supreme Court and in keeping with new developments in sexual science. The CDL grew exponentially, especially in response to another Keating innovation: documentary-style films such as *Perversion for Profit* (1963) that claimed a social-scientific basis for opposition to pornography, though one he derived from largely fabricated statistics. Strub shows Keating disregarding these stated principles when speaking out of earshot of the press, revealing, in Strub's view, that the new boss differed little in actual motivation from his Comstockian predecessors. The CDL thus stands in this work as a transitional phase between an older, declining moralism and the later and much more sophisticated conservative organizers who devised segmented marketing strategies that fomented sexual panic among the conservative rank and file, helping the New Right to assemble an effective coalition and set the agenda for national sexual politics after 1980.

Regrettably, the rest of the work, although offering tantalizing moments of insight, suffers from an uneven and frequently inadequate explanatory framework that

seems both at cross-purposes with what I presume to be Strub's intention to reach a mixed readership and one that ultimately undermines his capacity to knit together the evidence supporting his thesis. As in the proverbial rhyme about the want of a nail leading to first a shoe, then a horse, then a rider, and ultimately a kingdom lost, we see him shortchanging foundational details for the sake of narrative progression at the outset, with each misstep triggering a cascade of unintended consequences. An oversight that one might forgive in an otherwise well-organized text thus becomes magnified in this one: the postwar consensus model appears without explication in the early going. Specialists know this approach well, but even so, the absence of Strub's reflections on its strengths, limitations, and previous usage matters greatly: it is through this device that authors establish their professional bona fides at the beginning of the long dialogue with the reader. It would therefore be helpful to hear Strub reflect on questions such as: Why this model, and not another—say, Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle's *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (1989)? How literally or figuratively does he intend us to interpret this slippery term *consensus*, which comes replete with powerful associations in everyday usage? Where and when did the consensus reach its maximum influence in the post-McCarthy era, and what factors eroded its hegemony? How did the existence of a consensus influence the co-evolution of its various forms of social and cultural opposition?

Strub does remark offhandedly that "the late 1960s" marked the decline of consensus (p. 33). But in the main, we are left to deduce his conception of consensus from the unfolding text. At the outset, as Strub moves to establish his claim that "obscenity charges were routinely used to stigmatize and suppress queer sexual expression in postwar America" (p. 5), consensus in matters of sexual conduct and the law appears (contrary, I believe, to his intention) almost totalistic. We move from the last hurrahs of Comstockian efforts by the venerable New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1946 to a discussion of Senator Estes Kefauver's investigations of comics; then to Frederic Wertham's assertions concerning the corrupting influence of not-so-subtextual portrayals of sexuality in this same lowbrow medium; and on to the Los Angeles Police Department's harassment of the homophile movement. Strub takes care to point out in this first chapter that many of the formal prosecutions were finally overturned on appeal, and that the senator pulled his punches when drawing policy conclusions from his poorly conceived public hearings. Nevertheless, the end

result was that “‘deviant’ sexuality was stigmatized and suppressed through whatever means available, to better maintain the cherished normalcy on which social ideals of ‘Americanness’ were predicated” (p. 42). Non-specialist readers, especially, understanding “consensus” in its ordinary usage, may wonder: with the deck so clearly stacked against sexual freedom, why did appellate judges, the mandarins guarding the gates, not gleefully join in with the lower courts’ suppression of “depravity”? Why were they not all on the same page? Was the consensus not really a consensus after all? The advance framing that would have helped with this would also prepare these same readers to cope with the unintentionally *sui generis* emergence of conflicting judicial interpretations of obscenity law in the following chapter. Lacking such preparation, many readers may hear his account of the unraveling of consensus as echoing the older, triumphalist history of First Amendment absolutism: the gradual dawning of Truth with a capital “T” as the scales of Victorian ignorance dropped, too slowly, from the eyes of a few who became the fearless heroes of free speech. Those who draw this conclusion will again be confounded when Strub leads them into a discussion of “vanilla hegemony” in the final chapter. For the want of an explanatory nail, a shoe was lost.

Even more deeply consequential for readers’ estimation of Strub as a historical rhetor is his initially unexplained adoption of the vernacular usage of the term “liberal,” that sense in which it serves as the diametrical opposite of “conservative.” Having embraced this twentieth-century American gloss of the term, today freighted with partisan passions of the Tea-Party ilk, he seems genuinely puzzled that his evidence does not entirely confirm his presentist assumptions. Strub therefore faults postwar “liberals’” hesitancy to “follow their free-speech convictions” to what he presumes to have been their “logical corollaries and instead allowed a First Amendment exception to be made for ‘obscenity’” (p. 1), a formula that he subsequently applies to his discussion of the American Civil Liberties Union’s stance on obscenity in the 1950s (pp. 48-52). This teleology derives from what I regard as a remarkably truncated understanding of the history of liberalism. “The British concept of classical liberalism,” he belatedly advises his readers, denotes “a laissez-faire philosophy somewhat (though not entirely) removed from contemporary American liberalism” (254-55). Well, yes and no. Strub’s stance does throw into relief the historical development of distinctly American schools of liberal political thought that arose in an environment marked by the development of a vast, multiculturally

fragmented immigrant polity; the early abolition of the formal, feudal class privilege that is still a factor in Britain; an economic infrastructure and system of white social identity nurtured early on by the enormous profits derived from slave labor; and the development of a civic voluntary sector and a degree of evangelical religious affiliation unparalleled in the Atlantic world.

But I and many others—for example, Shane Phelan, in the first chapter of her *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (1989)—would argue that however distinctive, the American experiment in liberalism can only be fully understood as one of the many transnational developments in the ongoing rebellion against feudalism, which, even after four centuries, have yet to fully transform the polity, the economy, and the state. Placing Rooseveltian liberals’ willingness to assign a lower level of constitutional protection to obscenity in this larger context would enable Strub and his readers to see what he calls an anomaly as, in fact, a consistency: mid-century liberals of the 1950s—laissez-faire, Rooseveltian, and fundamentalist alike—had not yet lived through the application of identity politics, an insurgent critique of the limits of liberalism, to private sexual relations. I believe it is unfair, then, for Strub to fault them for not sharing our present-day understanding of the personal as political.[1] It made sense to key figures of the American Civil Liberties Union and their contemporaries to reserve the highest protections for speech to what they regarded as the public discourses of highest political consequence. Had Strub prepared his readers to think alongside him in such a line of reasoning, he not only could have built his credibility with his audience as a careful framer of evidence, but might also have seen fit to temper his tendency to render the conflicts at the center of his story in such starkly dichotomous, pro-con terms that frequently pit the forces of repression against the forces of sexual liberation.

It is in this tendency toward dichotomous analysis that Strub’s weak rhetorical design undermines his analytical efforts. Developments in the state regulation of sexual conduct are appropriate and important to the story that he wishes to tell. But Strub relishes a bit too keenly the opportunities that this discussion offers to hold prominent New Rightists historically accountable for their hypocrisy in denouncing publicly activities that they all too frequently have been caught practicing in private. Strub goes to the well for “gotcha” moments with a frequency that becomes an intrusive authorial mannerism, one that papers over the tensions between his impulses to narrate from above while trying also to ana-

lyze his evidence from the bottom up. Further papering over these tensions, he pairs this mannerism with an insistence on rehearsing what is, in the literature of the history of sexuality, an already well-established canon of state repression and moral panic. Thus Strub could have compressed this feature without detracting from its appropriate prominence in his argument. Damning the conservatives dams the flow of newer, fresher insights that could have made his monograph a much more original contribution to the literature.

To get at these underdeveloped details, the questions I would ask of Strub begin with: Was the Right's resort to the hoary techniques of moral panic appealing primarily to clever national leaders driven by both a pathological obsession with sex arising from their own repressed longings as well as the hunger for power so common in politics? Certainly those were factors—but was there not more to this story than individual idiosyncrasy? Should we not also think in terms of a political economy of sexuality, attending not only to the personal hypocrisies of individual leaders, but also to the Machiavellian (in the non-pejorative sense) substance of what it took to maintain gender hierarchy through both private and state power? Strub knows much more about this aspect of his puzzle than he shows us. Relieved of the pressure of keeping his narrative on track by a less ambitious overall design, he might have approached this history not as one of the forces of repression in diametric opposition to the forces of sexual liberation (as we so often encounter in this and other works in the history of sexuality); but rather as a more ordinary and more understandable—if less romantic—form of political and social conflict, in which political elites, state bureaucrats, blocs of highly motivated voters, grassroots activists both in favor of and opposed to “the sexual revolution,” influential public intellectuals, and the diverse agents of the mass media, all competed to influence the ultimate shape of a hegemonic perspective on sexual citizenship, with most but not all of these participants presuming the naturalness of gender hierarchy, even as they disagreed vehemently with one another over the means and ends by which to maintain it. “Liberals” and conservatives fought so bitterly because each wanted to control the definition of terms they shared *in common*. Here I am applying Steve J. Stern's brilliant treatment of the gender conflict of another time and place in *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (1995). Stern implicitly rejects the cultural-studies tendency to interpret as “rebellion” (that is, as contestation of first-order cultural principles, radicalism in the

sense of cutting at the roots) every manifestation of gendered conflict. (Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* [1991] and George Lipsitz's *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* [1990] offer examples of this cultural-studies tendency.) Instead, in keeping with the cultural-anthropological insight that conflict is intrinsic to human social systems, he takes care to distinguish between a genuine (and extremely rare) radicalism and the far more common conflicts among historical agents over the interpretation of shared terms and values. Framed in this manner, Strub could have pursued with a good deal more clarity his occasional references to the “dialectic” of postwar sexual politics (pp. 3, 214), exploring the contradictions inherent in a system that reifies masculinity by privileging men's sexual aggression against gendered Others while simultaneously demanding that those Others stabilize the private sphere through investment of their energies primarily in social and biological reproduction.

Still another dimension lost to the criticism of hypocritical New Rightists is inquiry into the historical agency of those led by such figures as Keating, Tim LaHaye (an antiobscenity crusader who sat on the board of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority), or James Dobson (a member of the infamous Meese Commission of the mid-1980s). Since I am not a specialist on the history of the New Right, I must rely on Strub to tell me: What do existing studies tell us about their followers—was it, as Strub's presentation seems to imply, *only* because the Keatings of the movement engineered sexual panics that the grassroots fell into line behind them? Were the conservative masses sufficiently naïve and shallow to have been so easily manipulated? No doubt, some, or perhaps even many, were; but still, in the aggregate, those thus Othered in Strub's approach were probably more like their less conservative contemporaries than their fundamentalist beliefs might at first blush seem to indicate. Were those who followed the likes of Falwell or LaHaye wholly immune to the blandishments of the culture of consumption explored so thoughtfully by Richard Wightman Fox, T. J. Jackson Lears, and their co-authors in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (1983); the trend toward popular acceptance of a broader range of sexual behavior, understood in sexological terms, suggested by Alfred Kinsey's highly flawed studies; or the relaxation of formal public comportment described by Kenneth Cmiel? [2] I suspect that there is a much more nuanced story to be told than can be accommodated in Strub's top-down narrative. The incompleteness of this story could send an army of readers in

the wrong direction. For the want of a clear message, a battle could be lost.

While I believe that Strub delivers in print a muddled final product that was far more promising in its original conception, I do not believe that the result was the total loss portrayed in the proverbial rhyme. A kingdom is not lost in the pages of *Perversion for Profit*. At the highest level of generalization, Strub's contention that the New Right exploited to good effect civil libertarians' mid-century deference to obscenity law's construction of a lesser-protected category of expression remains a vital and interesting proposition, even if the dots have not yet been connected in a consistently clear and convincing way. In his review of this work, David T. Courtwright argues that the abortion issue mattered far more intensely for the fundamentalist components of the Reagan Revolution than did pornography.[3] While I find that argument persuasive, Strub has nevertheless identified another strand of activism that certainly deserves further study in our efforts to understand the New Right's role in making—and attempting, at times, to unmake—the world that the 1960s made. The metaphorical horse can be reshod and the parts of the message that Strub has jum-

bled can be recovered, perhaps in a more sharply focused second edition or in new publications. With these, our understanding of the sexual politics of the twentieth century will no doubt be further amplified and clarified.

Notes

[1]. For the prehistory of identity politics, see Linda Nicholson, *Identity before Identity Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). To my knowledge, no one has yet attempted a formal history of this phenomenon, which L. A. Kauffman rightly identified as a critical mark of distinction between the political processes of the post-World War II era and that which came before. See her brief article, "The Anti-Politics of Identity," *Socialist Review* (Oakland, Calif.) 20, no. 1 (January-March 1990): 67-80.

[2]. Kenneth Cmiel, "The Politics of Civility," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 263-290.

[3]. David T. Courtwright, review of *Perversion for Profit*, by Whitney Strub, *Journal of American History* 98, no. 3 (December 2011): 907-908.

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