

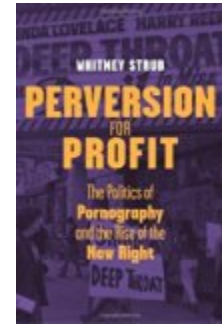
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Robert Rosen.** *Beaver Street: A History of Modern Pornography.* London: Headpress, 2010. 256 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-900486-76-7.

**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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Published on H-Histsex (August, 2011)  
Commissioned by Timothy W. Jones



## Free Speech and Competitively Priced Smut: Pornography in the United States

*Perversion for Profit* and *Beaver Street* contribute to understanding the cultural negotiations and social fault lines that pornography brought into acute focus in the late twentieth-century United States. Whitney Strub's *Perversion for Profit* describes and analyzes the cat-and-mouse battle between the mostly prudish, incrementally more aligned to the New Right, defenders of public morality and a pornography industry whose more unwholesome proclivities and economic successes provoked controversy. In some cases this clash led to legal action and tested the limits of the right to free speech. Robert Rosen's *Beaver Street* is a less conventional history. Rosen edited, wrote and, on one occasion, featured in pornography in a career spanning sixteen years. By combining memoir and historical account Rosen constructs a vivid impression of how pornography worked as an industry and the tensions imposed on the individuals involved, describing an everyday humanity whilst shocking in equal measures. The two books complement each other, providing an absorbing discussion of both permissible social mores and obscenity in the context of interpretations of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Strub offers a meta-textual analysis from the voluminous and lively body of literature surrounding pornography and pieces together the skirmishes prompted by

pornography and obscenity, focusing upon campaign groups, politicians, judges, lawyers, pornographers, and the general population. Strub's analysis has some parallels to other works on censorship by Paul Boyer, Nicola Beisel, Andrea Freidman, and Leigh Ann Wheeler.[1] Nevertheless, it extends the project and local focus that Andrea Freidman, for example, explored in her work on obscenity in prewar New York. *Perversion for Profit* stands out by concentrating in great detail and scope on a period in which pornography proved a cultural mainstay and a political issue. Strub's inclusion of the local battles in which obscenity proceedings emanate before eventually reaching the Supreme Court underlines the key friction between local and national law-making is key to the book's success. By showing these frictions Strub helps contextualize the change from the rather polite opposition to pornography posed by the relatively moderate Citizens for Decent Literature to the communist scare-mongering of the New Right or the outraged moralist New Christian Right.

Rosen, on the other hand, provides an account of his personal experience interspersed with a wider history of pornography. He describes the pressure and paranoia of being under the surveillance of the antipornography crusaders and maintaining sales whilst satisfying both publishers' requirements and readers' tastes. A sixties

counterculture participant of the kind that later pornography opponents feared, Rosen celebrates the subversive potential of the medium. Nonetheless, he admits that his kind of pornographer was outnumbered by those who were simply sexually precocious, cash-strapped writers (for instance Mario Puzo), or capitalists allured by the financial rewards of selling sex. The precariousness of the industry is apparent in Rosen's account. He describes magazines folding, participants finding more mainstream occupations, and editors developing cocaine habits. The dark side of pornography is also not obscured. Some of Rosen's protagonists inspire sadness as they are exploited, alienated from society, and experience feelings of shame and some rather unhappy personal lives. Together, this results in a rich account that adds considerable depth and texture to any understanding of how the pornography industry worked as a sector of the print media, particularly in regard to the uniquely intense outside scrutiny it received.

*Perversion for Profit* takes the reader through the ruptures in the modern antiporn movement. Following the Second World War, pornography was restricted under the law. Simultaneously, a liberal legal interpretation of free speech was becoming predominant, positing that censorship was anathema to American values. As the production of pornography on an industrial scale became more viable, the number and circulation of magazines increased; higher sales were prompted by more and more brazen and titillating pictures. In response, as Strub relates in chapter 3, an organized antiporn movement emerged. In 1963 Citizens for Decent Literature released the documentary *Perversion for Profit* which focused upon the extent of the pornography racket and the various types of pornography. This was coupled with the emergence of local chapters of the group which put pressure on local authorities to prevent obscene literature in the community. Strub's explanation of the way in which the First Amendment was tested by national and state legislatures when creating and applying obscenity laws is impressive. In the latter half of the book he explores the way in which the First Amendment debate intensified and became politicized by the New Right and New Christian Right. This qualitative change in the antiporn movement was in some ways mirrored in the more outré pornography that began to be produced at the same time, allowed by, as Strub argues, the permissive social changes of the sixties and seventies. However the internal vicissitudes of the pornography industry and its magazines are naturally better explained by Rosen.

*Beaver Street* fits the general narrative that Strub proposes. For instance, Rosen recalls being the subject of an early seventies obscenity dispute as the editor of City College's Student Newspaper Observation Post following the publication of a cartoon that depicted a nun masturbating with a crucifix. This cartoon was debated in the United States Senate by Republican James Buckley and led to a cunning bill that circumnavigated the hegemony of liberal free speech laws by cutting the funding for student papers. A few years later, as a result of sustained unemployment and a job offer, Rosen was working for pornographic titles *High Society* (followed by *Stag*, then *D-Cups*) and again irking the moral purists. Interestingly Rosen discusses the daily precautions taken to prevent obscenity accusation, the placement of strategic blue dots, the politics of "split beaver," and the adjustments made to magazines to satisfy stricter Canadian obscenity laws. With his encyclopedic knowledge of applied obscenity laws, Rosen details how he and his counterparts tried to provide their readers with the "smut" they demanded. The completion of this finely balanced task is interspersed with anecdotes of censorious threats and colorful colleagues both in front of and behind the camera. The stigma surrounding pornography attracted an eccentric milieu, as those intoxicated with wealth and sex mingled with social outsiders. Rosen captures them evocatively, the good and bad, which is a handy reminder that the book is as much a literary as it is a conventional historical account.

Although Strub's book is thoroughly engaging throughout, his focus upon reactions to modern pornography by American feminists is particularly thought-provoking. It resists the common assumption that feminists are categorically opposed to the medium and its frequent explicit sexism. Strub is insightful when analyzing the marriage of convenience between antipornography feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and the vehemently antifeminist New Right. Strub argues that Dworkin and the New Right's dalliance was due to American liberalism's failure to provide a space for a debate on sexual politics. In fact, many feminists sought to protect society from censorship and, as Strub shows, were thus compelled to defend pornography despite its failings. Rosen further complicates received interpretations of gender politics—which seem inextricable from pornography—by giving instances in which strong women have worked in porn as actors or magazine staff. Indeed, it is important to take into account the awkward relationship between female workers in the sex industry and organized feminism. Also instances of women's professional advance-

ment within the pornography industry do not disguise how few women were in positions of real power in the porn industry, or that women who become porn actors were often discarded decades before their male counterparts. The exploitation of women is an issue that historians of pornography cannot ignore, and one that could have been explored more in both texts.

Rosen adds further confusion to the reading of gender and partial confluences of feminist and New Right politics with his account of the Traci Lords scandal. Traci Lords was a highly successful porn actor who in 1986 admitted to having acquired a false driver's license and passport when she was fifteen in order to appear in pornographic films or photographs. The New Right responded to Lords's admission with a campaign that focused upon child protection and child pornography. Rosen describes the panic to remove every image of Lords from the *D-Cups* office to prevent accusations of child pornography. The controversy lent the Right considerable political capital and had significant legal ramifications for the magazines. Ronald Reagan added the "Traci Lords amendments" that Rosen argues were superfluous and craven changes to the already robust Child Protection Act of 1984. Lords eventually parlayed her infamy into a moderately successful non-pornographic film career. Rosen relates how Lords deployed quasi-feminist tropes to justify her advancement in the maleficent pornography industry and in contrast to her personal history of exploitation by relatives and men in the industry. This is slightly incongruent with Strub's conceptualization of a marriage of convenience between (anti)porn feminists and the Right. Rosen attempts to portray Lords as a strong woman, perhaps even a feminist. However, she does not appear feminist in a way that would be recognizable in Strub's account. Rosen's account of the Lords affair coupled with Strub's account

of feminism and free speech both work to problematize narratives of liberalism and conservatism that compete for control in this complex field.

Overall both Strub and Rosen have written thought-provoking and entertaining histories of modern United States pornography. Neither revel in smut—as the readers of *Stag* may have done—yet, neither are they coy, thus enabling the reader to gain a solid understanding of a large part of the print, film, and now Web-based pornographic media and its sociopolitical context. Rosen's lack of squeamishness may be off-putting for some. Readers of more "vanilla" tendencies may be put off by graphic descriptions more hard-core pornographic scenes, such as his account of the "insertion of fifteen billiard balls into a man's anus followed by an elbow-deep fist-fucking" (Rosen, p. 50). Rosen's candor is not simply aimed to titillate, but to inform about pornographic publishing from within its own idiom. What both Rosen and Strub convey is how pornography comes into contact with greater narratives of obscenity, permissiveness, sexuality, and gender. It is apparent from their accounts how pornography is a vital and rich subject for analyzing a range of social pressures and competing narratives.

#### Note

[1]. Paul Boyer, *Purity in Print: The Vice-Society Movement and Book Censorship in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968); Nicola Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Andrea Freidman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Leigh Ann Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004).

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**Citation:** Patrick Glen. Review of Rosen, Robert, *Beaver Street: A History of Modern Pornography* and Strub, Whitney, *Perversion for Profit: The Politics of Pornography and the Rise of the New Right*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. August, 2011.

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