

Why Liberals Should Ban Porn

Perhaps it was William Ewart Gladstone and his liberal tradition that inspired [those four Republican congressmen who recently called on Attorney General William Barr to prosecute pornographers under federal obscenity laws](#). Though they enraged self-avowed conservative and libertarian quarters of the internet, they may be part of a long transatlantic tradition of moralistic liberals.

Indeed, a ban on internet porn would not damage but preserve personal liberty. It would be a measure of liberal moralism that would make Gladstone proud.

During his 60 years in Parliament and 12 as prime minister of the United Kingdom, Gladstone advanced his own brand of liberalism that upheld economic freedom and religious liberty as well as moral constraints on industry, political cronyism, and imperialism.

Along those lines, his achievements included the institution of secret voting as well as the lifting of political and academic restrictions on Catholics, non-conformists, and non-Christians. He always challenged the expansion and abuses of empire, be they British, Russian, or Ottoman.

Through his words and deeds, Gladstone made clear that the express purpose of liberal governance was to defend against those things that encroach on personal liberty and the cultivation thereof. Surely the predatory pornography industry is just such a thing.

Targeting alcohol and slavery, the temperance and abolition movements emerged out of the “utopian” liberal movements of 19th-century moralists. Though Prohibition may have failed to eliminate alcohol use, the peculiar institution of slavery did not survive such reformism.

Was abolition an instance of state-enforced morality? Necessarily. Was it justified? Of course. Did it increase personal liberty? Exponentially.

Considering [the extensive relationship between porn and worldwide human trafficking](#), my comparing it to the horrors of antebellum slavery is not inappropriate.

The porn industry exploits young women and men while aggressively marketing its products to susceptible, addicted consumers of all ages. Porn, and the near-porn of music videos and Instagram, has been unavoidable on the internet, and its apparitions seldom ask for consent or age-verification.

To encourage such neglect is to abandon the liberal principles of societal interest and improvement. A proud lack of outward consideration may be a hallmark of so-called “libertarianism,” but it must not be understood as one of liberalism.

Doing nothing at all seems a rather conservative position. After all, Gladstone’s great Tory opponent, the Marquess of Salisbury, famously stated, “Whatever happens will be for the worse, and therefore it is in our interest that as little should happen as possible.”

But internet porn is clearly a problem about which something must be done. [A survey in 2014](#) found that 56 percent of British people – 76 percent of men and 36 percent of women – watch porn at least occasionally. [In a 2018 survey of people in relationships](#), 85 percent of respondents – 98 percent of men and 73 percent of women – said they’d used internet porn in the last six months. Most worryingly, researchers report that 17 percent of pornography users are compulsive.

That porn is so widespread and its abuse so prevalent is not a reason for inaction but rather a call to action. In *Ideas Have Consequences*, Richard Weaver wrote that the first step towards the restoration of a transcendent moral order is “a denial

that whatever is, is right.”

Just because it comprises a formidable adversary does not mean that the porn industry should be left alone. It demands confrontation from that most powerful of institutions, the state, which wields its monopoly on the use of force. Liberals in the lineage of Gladstone must accept public solutions to private abuses and stand as resolutely as he did to protect liberty.

Committed to the common good, Gladstone pioneered the British regulatory state as chancellor of the exchequer. He so distinguished himself as a defender of the working class that he was nicknamed “the People’s William.” At the same time, he was an ardent proponent of free trade and laissez-faire political economy, confident they would improve living standards.

Thus do moral and Gladstonian liberalism require that government oppose those activities and industries that thrive on exploitation. This approach is based on the “Whiggish” idea that man and society are improvable if not perfectible.

Contemporary defenders of liberalism must not content themselves with indifference towards those forces that act in contravention of liberty and the common good. A ban on internet pornography, which can be enforced alongside existing prohibitions on child abuse imagery and drug sales, is not only a good idea but a liberal one.

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