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DWORKIN, ANDREA (1946-2005)

Born to secular Jewish parents and raised in Camden, New Jersey, Andrea Dworkin became a radical “second-wave” feminist. By Dworkin’s own account (*Life and Death*, 3-38), her work is informed by a series of negative personal experiences, including sexual assault at age nine, again by doctors at the Women's House of Detention in New York in 1965 (after an arrest for protesting the Vietnam War), work as a prostitute, and marriage to a battering husband whom she left in 1971. While Dworkin self-identified as a lesbian, since 1974 lived with a gay male partner, writer John Stoltenberg, whom she married in 1998. Understandably, the main theme of Dworkin's work is male violence against women. This violence is a defining feature of our male-supremacist culture, in which rape, prostitution, and pornography are inevitable expressions of gender norms.

Dworkin's writings are primarily aimed at social change rather than intellectualizing. She describes her first book as “a political action where revolution is the goal” (*Woman Hating*, 17). What one finds in her writings is not so much philosophical theorizing as calls to action. Thus it is difficult to summarize the abstract theory to which she is committed and from which she draws arguments against the sexism she finds in our culture. What is clear is her desire to eliminate binary concepts of gender and their oppressive effects. (This perhaps dissolves the apparent tension in identifying as lesbian yet having a man as life-partner.) In particular, Dworkin urges the destruction of a female gender role that involves masochism, self-hatred, and passivity. She sees male supremacy constructed and reinforced in our culture through the sexist structuring of public institutions and private interactions, locating three crucial foci of male supremacy in action: pornography, sexual intercourse, and rape. These are her central concerns. Her work includes seven monographs, three collections of essays and speeches, a memoir (*Heartbreak*), two novels (*Ice and Fire*; *Mercy*), and a book of short stories (*New Woman's Broken Heart*), all of which explore these themes.

Pornography. Dworkin is well known for her anti-pornography writing and activism. This began with her analysis of pornography in *Woman Hating* and continued with a series of essays in *Our Blood* and *Letters from a War Zone* and her first full-length treatment, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. In *Woman Hating* she actually had positive things to say about the pornography of the 1960s and early 1970s, pointing out that its graphic depictions and celebrations of oral sex and female genitals helped “break down barriers to the realization of a full sexuality” (79). But in *Right-wing Women* she asserted that all feminists, to be feminists, had to be anti-pornography. Dworkin's campaign against pornography with lawyer Catharine MacKinnon has drawn much attention. In 1983, they drafted an ordinance for the Minneapolis City Council that treated pornography as a form of sex discrimination, making its production and distribution a ground for civil rights action. The ordinance defines pornography as the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women (*Pornography and Civil Rights*, 36).

This contrasts with the standard legal framework, which Dworkin and MacKinnon view as a mistaken in its focus on *obscenity* as pornography's problematic feature. Dworkin identifies the wrong of pornography in the harm it does to women. Women who participate in its production are coerced, entrapped, and exploited. In her view these women are working as prostitutes and are, like prostitutes, being objectified and dehumanized merely for the pleasure of men. Consumption of pornography also causes harm through its involvement in rape, battery, sexual harassment, abuse, and reinforcement of women's second-class status. Dworkin views pornography as one of, perhaps the, central means by which male supremacy in our society is constructed and perpetuated (*Right-wing Women*, 226-27).

The Minneapolis ordinance was twice passed by the City Council but vetoed by the mayor. Civil libertarians, including many feminists, vigorously opposed the ordinance. The basis of their objection was the claim that freedom of speech is fundamental in free, democratic societies. Curtailment of this freedom is justifiable only when some variety of speech can be shown to be sufficiently harmful and when the limits imposed on it are not vague or overbroad. The ordinance, they argued, failed on both grounds. Indeed, the unconstitutionality of the ordinance was upheld by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in *American Booksellers, Inc. v. Hudnut*, and affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court (see MacKinnon and Dworkin, *In Harm's Way*, 462-82).

Dworkin finds these arguments unpersuasive, believing that the free speech rights of men must not be treated as more important than the rights of women to be free from sexual abuse. She is equally unmoved by the claim that insufficient evidence exists establishing the harms of pornography, asserting that the hearings conducted about the ordinance provided compelling evidence (see *In Harm's Way*). Certainly the hearings revealed that some women who participated in the production of pornography were harmed by intimidation and violence. The hearings also established that some women have been abused and sexually assaulted by men who consume pornography and that pornography is sometimes incorporated into this abuse itself (see also Russell, "Pornography and Violence"). What this establishes about a causal connection between pornography and harm is not clear. Correlation alone does not demonstrate causation (see Soble, 144-50).

Dworkin replies that pornography is not like many other factors frequently present in abuse and rape, saying of men who perpetrate these crimes that "the directions [they] followed are found in pornography. . . . [T]hey are not found anywhere else" (*Pornography*, xxvi). Dworkin does not, however, merely assume that pornography causes men to assault women sexually through a simple process of mimicking pornography's content. Dworkin's model is more sophisticated: pornography purportedly affects men's attitudes, through its coupling of sexual pleasure with objectifying, degrading, or violent images of women, such that men become more likely to abuse women. Pornography "plays a big part in normalizing the ways in which [women] are demeaned and attacked" (*Life and Death*, 133). The mechanisms through which this alleged normalization occurs are those proposed by, among others, sociologist Diana Russell, who argues that exposure to pornography predisposes some men to desire rape and undermines inhibitions against acting on rape fantasies

(*Dangerous Relationships*, 121). The status of the empirical evidence here is contentious, though Dworkin clearly accepts Russell's interpretation.

In addition to being accused of naïveté about the sexual assault-pornography connection, Dworkin has also been accused of reinforcing sexist norms by portraying women, in and out of pornography, as passive victims. However, Dworkin is not anti-sexual nor does she assume male sexuality is intrinsically harmful. She condemns pornography because it expresses objectionable views of women and sexuality, but she believes that merely intellectually rejecting those views is not enough. We cannot reject these views yet continue to produce and consume the pornography that expresses them; we must eliminate pornography, not just read it in light of nonsexist beliefs. But Dworkin does not advocate the abolition of all sexually explicit material. Her own fiction contains graphic, sometimes violent, descriptions of sex. This, of course, raises the question of the distinction between pornography and unobjectionable sexual material. The ordinance defines pornography as sexually explicit *subordination* of women, so what must be distinguished are depictions that subordinate and those that don't. Dworkin understands subordination to be the "active placing of someone in an unequal position or in a position of loss of power" (*Pornography and Civil Rights*, 39). This might be uncontroversial, but the guidance it provides seems weak. Dworkin does not think that drawing the distinction is difficult in practice: no "pornographer has any trouble knowing what to make" (*Pornography and Civil Rights*, 36). Her optimism in the face of the complexity of the issue seems unwarranted.

Dworkin's perception of pornography stems from the analysis of cultural gender norms she presents in *Woman Hating*. There she approaches pornography as cultural material from which we can discern the principles that structure our gendered concepts of sexuality. But her analysis also starts with another form of material: fairy tales. These contain the gender roles that children learn and adults never overcome. Fairy tales, as she reads them, tell us that only two kinds of women exist. Good women (Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella) are passive, sleeping, innocent, helpless victims, while bad women (the Queen, the Wicked Stepmother) are active, devouring, awake, powerful. Men in fairy tales, on the other hand, are all heroes, all good, even when they do bad. Fairy tales, then, tell us that men and women are "different, absolute opposites" (47). In women, beauty, passivity, and victimization are desirable. In women, action and power are evil and must be destroyed. Whatever men do is good, because men do it. The moral of fairy tales is that "happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimized, destroyed, or asleep" (49).

The link for Dworkin is that "[p]ornography, like fairy tales, tells us who we are" (*Woman Hating*, 53; see Stoltenberg, 120-21). But its ideas are not confined to books and magazines; they structure the real world of human relations. To establish this, Dworkin discusses cultural practices that play out the sexist messages she has perceived, such as European witch-burning and Chinese foot binding. Witch-burning manifests the principles that ugliness, knowledge, action, and independence are dangerous in women, in need of punishment, worthy of death. Foot binding shows the value and beauty of women identified with disability, dependency, and passivity. These are clear examples of misogynist cultural practices. According to Dworkin, however,

they are continuous with contemporary female beauty practices, the result of the glorification of culturally mandatory and continual body modification that requires tolerance, even the romanticizing, of self-inflicted pain. This is one source of the masochism Dworkin finds in the constructed feminine personality. More generally, women become masochistic as the result of conforming to social rules of femininity that degrade them as persons. This is especially noteworthy because women's masochism is "the mechanism which assures that the system of male supremacy will continue to operate as a whole even if parts of the system itself break down or are reformed [It] must be rooted out from the inside before women will ever know what it is to be free" (*Our Blood*, 61).

Another theme appears in Dworkin's analysis of *Suck*, a countercultural pornographic magazine of the 1960s. The depiction of sexuality she finds there contains the same gender principles encoded in fairy tales. Dworkin argues that the sexual revolution was not revolutionary but reactionary in its reinforcement of masculinist culture and binary gender roles. This analysis is extended in her essay, "Why So-Called Radical Men Love and Need Pornography" (*Letters*, 214-21). Dworkin argues that men rightly fear the sexual violence they recognize in each other; to ensure their own safety, they arrange things so that sexual violence is directed against women as a class. Traditional sexual prohibitions against homosexuality and female promiscuity reinforce this class system. Weakening them therefore weakens the gender class system. The male radicals of the 1960s thus endangered their own social superiority by promoting sexual freedom. Faced with the choice between continuing the fight for freedom and shifting allegiance back to male supremacy, they chose the latter. This accounts for the subsequent proliferation of pornography and its increasing misogyny. Pornography only looks like it promotes women's sexual freedom; in fact, it contains the same sexist messages as fairy tales. It functions as propaganda to keep women in their place and is thereby backlash against feminism. This thesis is, of course, debatable. The proliferation of pornography is unlikely an effect of a small group of men reacting to feminism. Pornography is also unlikely to be effective against women's liberation, since the messages it expresses are ambiguous; to what extent woman-hating messages are in pornography, and whether they are understood to be there by consumers, is difficult to decide. Further, much pornography does not depict fairy-tale women, but celebrates women who are independent, active, and powerful.

Sexual Intercourse. Dworkin generally doubts the contribution of the sexual revolution to the liberation of women. She claims that neither oral contraception nor promiscuity help liberate women but, instead, perpetuate women's oppression. They make women "more accessible, more open to exploitation" (*Woman Hating*, 81; see also MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 144-45, and *Toward a Feminist Theory*, 190). The possibility of pregnancy and prohibitions against promiscuity gave women some power to refuse men's sexual demands. Removing them without making more fundamental changes only further disempowers women. Their accurately perceiving this, according to Dworkin, explains why right-wing women embrace traditional gender roles. They recognize that the liberation offered by the Left is no liberation at all. These women

“see that within the system in which they live they cannot make their bodies their own, but they can agree to privatized male ownership: keep it one-on-one, as it were” (*Right-wing Women*, 69). Even though this response will not promote the liberation of women either, the sexual revolution does not go far enough in its recommendation that women adopt a male pattern of sexuality free of commitment and in its valorization, for both men and women, of a promiscuous, objectifying sexual style (see Callahan). Furthermore, for Dworkin, behaving like men makes women oppressors. Liberation requires more fundamental changes.

A change in our model of sexuality is necessary. Dworkin therefore suggests that sexual intercourse itself is a politically suspicious practice in our current cultural context. Her analysis of intercourse categorizes it as a central experience of objectification and oppression endured by women and through which male supremacy is taught and learned. Our culture's concepts of gender and sexuality make penetration an act of conquering, possession, and violation that turns women into objects for men's ownership and control. This objectification is at the same time “the normal use of a woman, her human potentiality affirmed by it, and a violative abuse” (*Intercourse*, 122). So long as men have power over women and male sexuality is constructed as dominating and controlling, heterosexual coitus will have this negative character.

The meaning of intercourse is, for Dworkin, independent of the meaning individual acts of intercourse might have for the participants. Even feminist men dominate and control women when they have intercourse with them; even women who experience coital pleasure and not violation or domination are violated and dominated. Social power relations determine the negative meaning of intercourse, not the individual's intentions or feelings. “Intercourse occurs in a context of a power relation that is pervasive and incontrovertible” and, moreover, “most men have controlling power over what they call *their* women--the women they fuck” (*Intercourse*, 125-26). The social power of men is enacted in and reinforced through coitus, and is a central aspect of its meaning, despite what we experience. Whatever one makes of the claim that social context solely determines the meanings of actions (surely there is much to worry about here), a weaker reading of Dworkin has her saying only that individuals do not have complete freedom to fix the meanings of their actions. In sex, as in language, we must fashion meaning out of the materials at hand. Still, the cultural materials related to coitus might not be as univocal as Dworkin believes and her pessimism about intercourse might not be fully justified.

Dworkin entertains the idea that intercourse must be abandoned to break the hold that the model of dominance, invasion, and possession has over us, arguing men may have to “give up their precious erections and begin to make love as women do together” (*Our Blood*, 13). As early as *Woman Hating*, she extols androgynous sexuality: “androgynous fucking requires the destruction of all conventional role-playing . . . and of the personality structures dominant-active ('male') and submissive-passive ('female')” (185). The philosophy of sexuality Dworkin advances, then, makes genuine human sexuality depend on genuine human freedom--freedom from arbitrary and oppressive gender roles. Until these are eradicated, coitus will retain its negative meaning and function as a classroom of male supremacy. Ethical and humane intercourse might be

possible in the future, but only after we achieve real freedom.

Rape. Calls for freedom occur repeatedly in Dworkin's writings: not only freedom from gender roles and pornography, but also from rape. For Dworkin, rape is, along with pornography and intercourse, one of three focal elements of male supremacy. The prominence of rape in the history of Western culture (see Brownmiller) is important in Dworkin's thoughts about intercourse: the violation and possession of intercourse is only a short step from rape. Dworkin's blurring the line between consensual intercourse and rape is intentional (*Intercourse*, 136-38; see MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory*, 146, 174-75). It derives from her belief that women have been socially and legally unable to give or withhold sexual consent through much of human history. This inability does not derive from some deficit in women but from the social and legal negation of their autonomy and personhood. If women are not afforded the same rights as men, if they are legally chattel, if economic and social circumstances curtail their choices, and if they are socialized to be passive and masochistic, then women will hardly be in a position to grant or withhold genuine consent.

Unified by men's right of access to women's bodies, consensual intercourse and violent rape are thereby points on the same continuum. All "consensual" heterosexual sex is for women some form of sexual-economic bargain. This is clear in prostitution, which vividly expresses the economic exploitation of women. Dworkin asserts that prostitutes are coerced by the system of male supremacy, even when they are not intimidated or forced into particular acts of prostitution. Women cannot voluntarily prostitute themselves any more than they can genuinely consent to "normal" intercourse. Indeed, Dworkin connects prostitution and rape: prostitution "in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body" and "is more like gang rape than it is like anything else" (*Life and Death*, 141).

Dworkin's writings on rape concentrate on the meanings and implications of historical and contemporary laws about rape, sexual assault, and marriage. She also argues that rape is the inevitable expression of masculine sexuality as constructed in Western culture. Rape and sexual assault are not merely acts done by "psychopaths or deviants from our social norms" but are "committed by exemplars of our social norms" (*Our Blood*, 45). Rape and assault are caused by our normative definitions of men as aggressive, dominant, and powerful and women as passive, submissive, and powerless. Thus, we must eliminate these cultural definitions. Again, Dworkin unearths the problems our gender norms generate.

Dworkin points out that women have been treated in law and by custom as the property of their fathers or husbands. This remained in the law of rape until only quite recently. Marital rape became criminal in all 50 states only in 1993, and thirty-three states still retained some exceptions to their marital rape laws in 2003 (Bennice and Resick). Previously, men had a legal right of sexual access to their wives. Wives did not have the power to refuse. On Dworkin's view, this situation was just part of a pattern of regulation of sexual conduct that normalized coercive relations between the sexes, a pattern that included treating compliance as consent, admitting victims' sexual history in defense of a rape charge, and requiring physical injury as proof of rape. A cultural

belief that women want to be raped, which is often expressed in pornographic and mainstream portrayals of women as deserving, inviting, and enjoying rape, also normalizes sexual violence. Perhaps novelistic and cinematic depictions of a woman's enjoying rape should not be read uncritically as endorsements. Even so, Dworkin insists that in our culture "rape becomes the signet of romantic love" and so "remains our primary model for heterosexual relating" (*Our Blood*, 29). In her early work, she argued that the solution to the problem of rape lay in part in the revision of rape laws. Progress has been made on this front and Dworkin should get some credit. Her writing as a revolutionary act has had an effect.

Critics of Dworkin do recognize that accusing her of "man-hating" in her opposition to pornography and intercourse misunderstands her, however natural the accusation is, given her strong convictions and the force of her expression (compare the careful Nussbaum with the less careful Mullarkey). The real targets of Dworkin's contempt are the norms of masculinity and femininity we have constructed in our commitment to binary concepts of gender and the violent, misogynist sexuality both men and women inherit as a result. This perspective fuels her campaigns against rape and pornography and her pessimistic analysis of the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

See also Consent; Firestone, Shulamith; MacKinnon, Catharine; Objectification; Polysemicity; Pornography; Prostitution; Rape; Rape, date and acquaintance; Work, sex as.

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Sarah Hoffman