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Complicity and Resistance: Andrea Dworkin's *Intercourse*

Helen Pringle

Being owned and being fucked are or have been virtually synonymous experiences in the lives of women. He owns you; he fucks you. The fucking conveys the quality of the ownership: he owns you inside out. The fucking conveys the passion of his dominance: it requires access to every hidden inch. He can own everything around you and everything on you and everything you are capable of doing as a worker or servant or ornament; but getting inside you and owning your insides is possession: deeper, more intimate, than any other kind of ownership. Intimate, raw, total, the experience of sexual possession for women is real and literal, without any magical or mystical dimension to it: getting fucked and being owned are inseparably the same; together, being one and the same, they are sex for women under male dominance as a social system. In the fuck, the man expresses the geography of his dominance: her sex, her insides are part of his domain as a male This reality of being owned and being fucked – as experience, a social, political, economic, and psychological unity – frames, limits, sets parameters for, what women feel and experience in sex. Being that person who is owned and fucked means becoming someone who experiences sensuality in being possessed: in the touch of the possessor, in his fuck, however callous it is to the complexity or the subtlety of one's own humanity. Because a woman's capacity to feel sexual pleasure is developed within the narrow confines of male sexual dominance, internally there is no separate being – conceived, nurtured somewhere else, under different material circumstances – screaming to get out. There is only the flesh-and-blood reality of being a sensate being whose body experiences sexual intensity, sexual pleasure, and sexual identity in being possessed: in being owned and fucked.¹

For Andrea Dworkin's feminism, objectification is fundamental in thinking through questions of who I am, who you are, who we are, as persons – or, as women, as other and less than persons. Objectification for Dworkin involves being defined in terms of your sexual use and being used in that way. At the heart of objectification is 'the fuck'. The violence of the word reflects how objectification works as probably 'the most singly destructive aspect of gender hierarchy, especially as it exists in relation to intercourse' (177). Dworkin argues that understanding 'the fuck' is a central task of a feminist account of justice, that is, giving to others what is their due as humans. In our world, it is now often assumed that having more intercourse is a sign of greater freedom, of sexual liberation (and pleasure). For Dworkin, however, more fucking is not the path to greater freedom, at least not for women.

Dworkin argues that gender is not simply difference between men and women but that it is a relation of domination and subordination, which marks out women as what can be sexually used and abused. She goes beyond noting that those who have political and economic power are more likely to be men, and that power has been biased to uphold men's status; she makes the claim that power in its very form in our world is exercised as male power. The very language of identity, knowledge and justice is that of male sexuality, in which women appear as objects for use. That male language is the only tongue there is. There is no other:

We know only this one language of these folks who enter and occupy us: they keep telling us that we are different from them; yet we speak only their language and have none, or none that we remember, of our own; and we do not dare, it seems, invent one, even in signs and gestures. Our bodies speak their language. Our minds think in it. The men are inside us through and through. We hear something, a dim whisper, barely audible, somewhere at the back of the brain; there is some other word, and we think, some of us, sometimes, that once it belonged to us (170–71).

How we speak, how we see and what we do: all these work themselves out in male terms. Objectification is a form of cognition, of knowledge of ourselves, through which we come to know ourselves as the things called women. The crucial point here is not only that sexual difference is constructed rather than natural, although it is, and not only that sexual difference is constructed in male terms, although it is. Sexual difference takes shape in terms of domination and subordination, a hierarchy that is itself erotic. Through the making of women as objects, men are aroused to dominance (I fuck, therefore I am).

For Dworkin's feminism, the objectification of women is not primarily accomplished as repression acting on some previously existing freedom, space or body. The construction of gender involves making accomplices in oppression, such that the harm thereby created becomes invisible, or at least mystified. Objectification is what *constitutes* us as women. We are rewarded for doing this to ourselves, for shaping and presenting ourselves in certain ways. This harm of objectification is so difficult to see because it is primarily accomplished through sex itself.

That is, the detriment or harm to women at issue *is* sex – which, as Dworkin points out, everyone now wants to get much more of, much more of the time. She suggests, 'In Amerika [Dworkin's spelling], there is the nearly universal conviction... that sex (fucking) is good and that liking it is right: morally right; a sign of human health; nearly a standard for citizenship' (59). Our allegiance to sex is like a loyalty oath, from which dissent and ambivalence are not permitted (60, 169–70). This loyalty oath to 'more sex' as liberation fails to understand how intercourse works as performance of domination and as dramatization of subordination. In *Intercourse*, Dworkin analyses the making of women and men in the acts and institution of sex, through an exploration of various literary works.

Pornography is at the heart of how objectification works as domination. We live in a pornographic society and culture, not only in the sense that men's ('girlie') magazines exist, or that those magazines and other media *reflect* an unequal treatment of women *elsewhere*. Dworkin argues that pornography *is* the treatment of women, not its reflection and not harmless fantasy. She does not understand pornography along the model of contagion (man reads rape, man rapes women). Rather, her argument is that 'Pornography is the theory, pornography is the practice'.² It is a *practice* of sexual subordination through which women are constructed. Pornography runs a masquerade that it is about the appreciation of women, and about setting them free, but for Dworkin it is a modality of the fuck as sexual possession.

By 'possession' is meant here not only abuse through rape, but the way in which '[t]he normal fuck by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation' (79). Being taken possession of in this way is for women a normal everyday reality:

... women feel the fuck – when it works, when it overwhelms – as possession; and feel possession as deeply erotic; and value annihilation of the self in sex as proof of the man's desire or love.... [B]eing possessed is phenomenologically real for women; and sex itself is an experience of diminishing self-possession, an

erosion of self. That loss of self is a physical reality, not just a psychic vampirism; and as a physical reality it is chilling and extreme, a literal erosion of the body's integrity and its ability to function and to survive (84).

Women's complicity in the fuck of possession is not natural or biological. It is born from our desire to live. Complicity is a survival mechanism that proceeds to a more complete annihilation of the self, while masked as the giving (and sometimes even the experience) of pleasure.

In order to live, women transform ourselves into an object to be desired; we construct *ourselves* as a beautiful and fuckable thing, in a palpably physical sense. This is the terrible damage done through collaboration in women's possession as objects, confirmed in the act of fucking itself:

It is especially in the acceptance of object status that her humanity is hurt: it is a metaphysical acceptance of lower status in sex and in society; an implicit acceptance of less freedom, less privacy, less integrity. In becoming an object so that he can objectify her so that he can fuck her, she begins a political collaboration with his dominance; and then when he enters her, he confirms for himself and for her what she is: that she is something, not someone; certainly not someone equal (178).

From complicity through to collaboration, women become objects that are not human 'in any sense related to freedom or justice' (179). Our identity is thereby estranged from personhood and from the freedom of persons. As complicit objects, women are 'these so-called persons in human form but even that... not exactly, who cannot remember or manifest the physical reality of freedom, who do not seem to want or to value the individual experience of freedom' (179–80). An incalculable injustice is done, every bit as material, and as real, as oppression at work.

Dworkin's argument in regard to the fuck of possession rests on seeing the violence of subordination as intimately connected to sexual pleasure. She thereby challenges the making (in our world, the only one we have) of any clear distinction between sex and violence. Dworkin takes seriously the notion that we are socially constructed, presenting a radically non-biological theory of what it means to be man or woman. This entails that there is nothing that I could call 'my true sexuality' as some natural instinct or impulse striving to be released from its prison of social puritanism. Male power is not biological, not a power externally imposed, even though it is so encompassing and successful that it is easy to say, 'that's the way the world is'.

In the seeming totality of this system, the question becomes: what could freedom mean for the possessed, those who are owned and fucked? Dworkin writes, 'The political meaning of intercourse for women is the fundamental question of feminism and freedom: can an occupied people – physically occupied inside, internally invaded – be free; can those with a metaphysically compromised privacy have self-determination; can those without a biologically based physical integrity have self-respect?' (156). Or, how could we gain freedom where our very bodies are shaped by a complicity that begins in the destruction of 'self-respect, the capacity for self-determination and freedom – readying the body for the fuck instead of for freedom?' (180).

From Dworkin's perspective, a theory of sexuality is feminist in treating sexuality as a social construct of male power. Women are not *excluded* from this male-defined world; they are incorporated into it as its targets (its victims), but even more as its accomplices. In this world, women are not autonomous but are embodiments of male power (I am fucked, therefore I am, an object). The unfreedom of women differs significantly from other forms of unfreedom, because it involves complicity and moreover a complicity in pleasure. Oppression takes the space and name of freedom in positioning women to initiate their own destruction:

Whatever intercourse is, it is not freedom; and if it cannot exist without objectification, it never will be. Instead, occupied women will be collaborators, more base in their collaboration than other collaborators have ever been: experiencing pleasure in their own inferiority; calling intercourse freedom. It is a tragedy beyond the power of language to convey when what has been imposed on women by force becomes a standard of freedom for women: and all the women say it is so (181).

This system of male power poses the question to feminism of who it is possible to be and how one can live in a culture that tortures women into shape like this. If you are created as an object, if you take form as a woman through objectification, how can you speak from the position of subject, as other than object? For Dworkin, feminism confronts the very impossibility of *being* human, for the thing called woman.

The political face of this impossibility is the apparent consent of many women to practices built on objectification: women's consent in forceful sex, in prostitution, in the making and use of pornography. This consent is not a point *against* Dworkin's analysis. Acknowledging women's consent is integral to her analysis of how male power exercises itself through the distribution of pleasure.

Pornography holds a privileged place in the pleasure economy, that is, pornography *as* sex, which creates the object woman, and whose possession and use *is* sex in the male system. Pornography invents women in its investiture of power in men. Pornography does not stand outside or against law, but is central in the law of sexual dominance, whose purpose is 'to promote the power of men over women and to keep women sexually subjugated (accessible) to men'. The central principle of the law of dominance is the creation of women as less human – and less free – than men (189). We live in a pornographic world, in which pornography is the public face of male social order, not private illicit entertainment.

What then is to be done? How can the objects be free? How can they even speak, as themselves and in their own voice? One of Dworkin's most innovative proposals, with Catharine MacKinnon, approached pornography as a civil rights violation (analogous to racial discrimination, say), allowing those hurt by (pornographic) subordination to speak of their detriment and claim correlative damages. The proposal used the definition, 'Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women'.³ After hearings that gathered evidence from experts and from women and men who claimed their lives had been wounded by pornography, Dworkin and MacKinnon proposed amending US city ordinances in line with this view that pornography *is* 'a practice of civil inequality on the basis of gender'.⁴

As part of the law of sexual order, pornography delineates who is fuckable and how. The old law of who and how changed radically in the 1960s and 1970s, but Dworkin warned that a generalization of access to fucking did not herald a new freedom for women. Her suspicion of the liberating power of normal sex was viewed by some of her critics as opposition to sex itself. It was once a common slur that Dworkin had said that all sex is rape. This criticism is easily refuted by the absence of any such statement in her work.⁵ However, Dworkin *did* argue that it is often difficult to distinguish sex from rape in the system of subordination that passes as pleasure, where rape resembles what passes for the (normal) sex by which men assert possession of women. Speaking of Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Dworkin writes that 'It takes a human consciousness, including a capacity for suffering, to distinguish between a rape and a fuck. With no interior life of human meaning and human remorse, any fuck is simply expressive and animalistic, whatever its consequences or circumstances' (57). However, Dworkin conveyed with characteristic humour her confidence that there is indeed a difference to be discerned: 'I think both intercourse and sexual pleasure can and will survive equality'.⁶

Dworkin sees sexual subordination as a question about injustice, of how some live and breathe at the expense of others. Women do not *live* in this order or in this world. And this is, and justly is, our aim: to live well and to flourish. When our pleasure is a complicity or a stake in our subordination, we are not living. Our life is not 'our own.' To become a woman in the form of an image of male pleasure is to live out an injustice, to live your life as a *reflection* of male power.

For Dworkin, we commonly identify what we see as sex in this world with what sex could be in another world. We identify what we have to settle for as sex and as passion. But fucking could be more. Fucking could be redemption in and of the world, as Dworkin writes in discussing James Baldwin:

In fucking, one's insides are on the line; and the fragile and unique intimacy of going for broke makes communion possible, in human reach – not transcendental and otherworldly, but an experience in flesh of love. Those broken too much by the world's disdain can become for each other, ... 'the dwelling place that each had despaired of finding' (64).

Sex promises us an 'astonishing grace', the possibility 'of being known, being seen and known in all one's awful trouble and shabby dignity, having a witness to what one is and why' (65). An astonishing grace, although rebuffed by our fear: 'With this grace, fucking can be communion, a sharing, mutual possession of an enormous mystery; it has the intensity and magnificence of violent feeling transformed into tenderness' (76). In *Intercourse* and her other work, Dworkin offers a morality of sex, against its corruption in a pornographic world, in a rape culture tainted by '[c]heap, propagandistic views of fucking' (67).

Dworkin did not see more fucking as the benchmark of women's freedom. She knew from her own life and experience that trying to imagine a sex of mutuality between equals could earn for a woman the name of an enemy of sex itself. Dworkin suggests that critiques of rape, pornography and prostitution are labelled 'sex negative', 'perhaps because so many men use these ignoble modes of access and domination to get laid, and without them the number of fucks would so significantly decrease that men might nearly be chaste' (61).

However, fucklessness does not by definition equal being an alien, and it does not equal being unfree. Dworkin cites the 'rebel virginity' of Joan of Arc, whose refusal to be fucked (over) was not prudery or weakness but 'harmonious with the deepest values of resistance to any political despotism' (118). Joan refused 'sexual accessibility to men' in the same gesture as she refused 'civil insignificance', in a rejection of 'the social meaning of being female in its

entirety.... Her virginity was a radical renunciation of a civil worthlessness rooted in real sexual practice' (106). Dworkin's analysis of the fuck as a social and political 'institution' (not simply a set of individual acts) enables us to see how resistance to the fuck, in our world, can be a political gesture of great power. Rather than a cowering from freedom, such resistance can constitute a refusal in the very name of civil standing and significance – and of freedom.

At the heart of Dworkin's feminism was a wild and extravagant optimism that subordination was not natural, not inevitable, and that it could come to an end through such intransigence and 'crazy' resistance as that of Joan of Arc. Dworkin's feminism was a wager on that possibility:

The boys are betting on our compliance, our ignorance, our fear.... The boys are betting that their depiction of us as whores will beat us down and stop our hearts. The boys are betting that their penises and fists and knives and fucks and rapes will turn us into what they say we are – the compliant women of sex, the voracious cunts of pornography, the masochistic sluts who resist because we really want more. The boys are betting. The boys are wrong.⁷

And if the boys are wrong? Dworkin's epigraph to *Intercourse* is taken from Yeats' tender paean to the 1916 Easter uprising: 'All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.' For Dworkin, feminism was the possibility of that terrible beauty in our lives, nothing less. Nothing less than a world transformed by the rising of its objects.