

ANDREA DWORKIN'S *PORNOGRAPHY: MEN POSSESSING WOMEN* – A REASSESSMENT

Bob Brecher

IMAGE <http://e-edition.metro.co.uk/2011/06/15/26.html>

Introduction

Published in 1981, Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* appeared to have changed the intellectual landscape – as well as changing many people's lives. Pornography, she argued, not only constitutes violence against women; it constitutes the main conduit for such violence, of which rape is at once the prime example and the central image. In short, it is patriarchy's most powerful weapon. Feminists' single most important task, therefore, is to deal with pornography. After the initial furore, however, the skirmishes – even battles -- the book initiated both within and about feminism soon died down. By the early 1990s, it was generally seen, at best, as a diversion. Today, who would argue that pornography is patriarchy's central weapon? Indeed, who would argue that pornography is a political issue at all? Or that the relations between women and men are the central political issue?

The facts about any putative causal relationship of pornography to rape have

been endlessly disputed: the outcome is inconclusive. The psychologists and sociologists have all had their similarly inconclusive say. Censorship is out of the question. Dworkin and McKinnon's 1992 *Model Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance* is a curio of American second-wave feminism, as is Dworkin's book. Pornography is not an issue. Nor indeed is feminism: equality has been more or less achieved and the suggestion that patriarchy remains crucial is best understood as nostalgia for a different age.

Or so it seemed until the recent and welcome resurgence of feminist activism among young women.

Still, I shall argue that Dworkin has much to teach us in today's neo-liberal world. Her argument is not primarily a causal one, despite sometimes reading as if it were. The legal route she chose as the ground on which to fight may well be a dead end, but that does nothing to undermine the force of her underlying analysis. It may even be that pornography is less pivotal than she thought; but even then, the form of her analysis and the substance of her argument, far from being rhetorical and/or fallacious, are exactly what we need to counter the depredations of neo-liberal "common sense". That she herself found it difficult to find a language beyond that of liberalism to express her argument is no excuse either for ignoring or misinterpreting it. In places her argument certainly remains within liberal constraints; in others, however, it is profoundly anti-liberal: but this internal tension does not detract from its pertinence.

What is immediately striking is how little attention has been paid to Dworkin's actual analysis. Take for example two representative collections, the first a committed anti-pornography text, the second a more "balanced" one. Edited by a formidable campaigner, Catherine Itzin, *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties: a Radical New View* (1992), contains twenty-six articles, only two of which (Kappeler; Cameron and Frazer) engage with Dworkin's analysis (and even then not in detail) rather than with its perceived implications. Drucilla Cornell's 2000 collection, *Feminism and Pornography*, while including two articles by Dworkin herself, contains nothing about *Pornography* among its thirty-nine pieces. Alison Assiter's 1989 *Pornography, Feminism and the Individual* is an honorable exception in its analysis of how pornography exemplifies sexism (for all that it argues, like her later work [Assiter and Avedon, 1993], against both censorship and Dworkin's emphasis on pornography). A 2012 google search for 'Andrea Dworkin pornography critique' brings up some 3640 items: none of the first hundred or so address what she herself identifies as her argument. So what does she actually say?

Dworkin's Basic Argument

Here is how Andrea Dworkin opens her book:

This is a book about the *meaning* of pornography and the system of power in which pornography exists. Its *particular theme* is the power of men in pornography (Dworkin, 1981, p.9: my emphases).

The fifth short paragraph on that opening page reads:

With respect to both obscenity and the First Amendment: this is not a book about what should or should not be shown; it is a book about the meaning of what is being shown (Dworkin, 1981, p.9).

What could be clearer? The fact that Dworkin would later argue about what should or should not be shown without legal redress does not alter the fact that *this* text concerns the meaning of pornography. As for the charge of essentialism – boys are culturally moulded into patriarchy through pornography, an argument she certainly makes in the book (Dworkin, 1981, pp. 48-69) -- the final sentence of her Preface suggests at least a tension between the essentialism suggested both here and elsewhere, and her opening insistence that, quoting Christabel Pankhurst (1913), ‘Men have a simple remedy for this state of things. They can alter their way of life’ (Dworkin, 1981, p.9). Dworkin’s topic, then, is exactly what her title announces: men possessing women. (For discussion of women as chattel, see Dworkin, 1981, pp. 101-102 and, stunningly, Rhys 1969a, 1969b, 1971, 1973). That is at once the meaning of pornography and what pornography is. Pornography is not simply those artefacts (films, photos, texts) in which ‘the graphic depiction of whores’ (Dworkin, 1981, p.10) takes place: it is also and at once the material reality in which those artefacts consist and which they exemplify.

How should we understand this claim? Crucially, it is not the simple causal claim that pornography causes sexual violence, and in particular rape,

although – as I shall go on to argue – *some* sort of causal claim is involved. But it is a far more complex one. Nor is it a claim about the conditions of production of visual pornography; about what is and what is not pornographic; about whether or not, and if so how, pornography should be censored; or even about what, if anything, is to be done about pornography's role in at once exemplifying and helping instantiate male sexual violence. Dworkin has plenty of things to say in the book about the first two of these -- especially about the enculturation of boys and the torture of women in the production of pornography – but that is not its primary subject. She also had much to say about the last three (censorship, how feminists should use law and the prospects for men's changing). Certainly one might wish that she had been more careful to separate out, both conceptually and textually, those sets of claims from that about pornography's function. Nonetheless, it is hardly difficult to do so. Nor will it do to read this text through the prism of her later writing, claims and campaigns.

Part of the difficulty lies in Dworkin's background liberal assumptions. She does not articulate the details of her view about 'the meaning of what is being shown' because, working within an overall liberal framework as she does, she sees no need to do so. Three difficulties thus tend to hobble her argument. First, the liberal model of harm is one that cannot articulate harms that do not accrue to specified individuals: hence her stress on the conditions of production of pornography. Second, it assumes a unilinear notion of

causation in the social world: hence the role of her psychological-sociological claims. Third, there is a commitment, especially in American liberalism, to the remedy of law and in particular to seeking such remedy in terms of the First Amendment and 'free speech': hence her later work. But her insight in this text transcends all these limitations.

To show how, I shall say something about cause and effect; then discuss an anti-liberal view of harm; and finally return to Dworkin's text.

Cause and Effect

Already in 1992 Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer made it clear 'what is wrong with framing the pornography issue in this way', [ie, as an argument about cause and effect]: 'feminists can move beyond simplistic notions of cause and effect without conceding the argument altogether' (Cameron and Frazer, 1982, p.359). They argue, first -- and rightly -- that causal accounts of action are self-contradictory: if what you do were caused in the way that the events in the physical world are, then you would not have *acted* at all, but merely behaved. Second, that direct and unilinear causal connections are not the only connections between actions and events in the social world. Again, they are right. Their suggestion that sexual sadists take on a culturally available role -- that theirs is a performance -- is particularly apposite: access to that role is available in and through a set of meanings encapsulated in pornography.

Let me clarify the sorts of connection they propose. One response to the Holocaust has been to regard it as the apotheosis of the Enlightenment. What might this mean? Clearly the claim is not that the Enlightenment straightforwardly caused the Holocaust, in the same sort of way that anti-semitism was one of its causes. The latter claim argues, first, that in the absence of anti-semitism, the Holocaust would not have taken place -- anti-semitism is a necessary condition of the Holocaust; and, second, that anti-semitism was enough -- in the circumstances concerned -- to bring about the Holocaust -- anti-semitism is a sufficient condition of the Holocaust. That is to say, the claim that anti-semitism caused the Holocaust is like the claim that a particular earthquake caused such-and-such a tsunami; or that the beaker of water turned blue because I added copper sulphate. In short, the claim about anti-semitism -- a social scientific claim -- approximates to the causal claims of natural science (albeit in more complex form). But no one would claim that the Enlightenment was the necessary and (in the circumstances) sufficient cause of the Holocaust.

So how is the alleged connection between the Enlightenment and the Holocaust to be understood? Certainly it is not a question of the Enlightenment's being a sufficient condition of the Holocaust; the claim is not that, given the Enlightenment, the Holocaust had to happen (in the absence of countervailing conditions). Is it then a question of the Enlightenment's

being a necessary condition of the Holocaust, the claim that the Holocaust would not have occurred had it not been for the Enlightenment? Adorno and Horkheimer come close to this position: 'In the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1973, p.1). The problem, however, is that the notion of a necessary condition is far less precise than that of a sufficient condition. Consider again the copper sulphate's turning the water blue. Its introduction into the beaker of water is *only one* of the necessary conditions of the water's turning blue; and it is necessary only given the circumstances – someone could have poured blue ink into it. That is to say, those conditions are picked out as necessary which in some way *stand out* from all the *other* background conditions. Thus the Enlightenment is understood as an intrusion: unlike the presence of oxygen, water and gravity, the technology of industrialization, the formation of the Nazi Party, the presence in Europe of Jewish people, the founding of Christianity and an indefinite number of other necessary conditions of the Holocaust's taking place, the Enlightenment stands out in some way. But it is hard to say exactly how. Berel Lang speaks of 'affiliation' (Lang, 1990, pp. 189-206): as James Schmidt puts it, he argues that 'because it failed to transform European society, the Enlightenment left in place a structure of religious prejudices and intolerance that would, a century and a half later, result in Nazi anti-Semitism ...' and that therefore 'the Enlightenment ideal of

religious toleration ... paradoxically creates a "conceptual structure" that has an "affiliation" with Nazi genocide' (Schmidt, 2000, 747). This is how Lang himself elucidates the idea:

... certain ideas prominent in the Enlightenment are recognizable in the conceptual framework embodied in the Nazi genocide; and ... if the relation between those two historical moments is not one of direct cause and effect ... the Enlightenment establishes a ground of historical possibility or causal evocation for the Nazi genocide (Lang, 1990, 168-169).

And having granted that that does not 'demonstrate an historical connection between the two', he goes on to argue that

The ideational framework in which the act of the Nazi genocide was set involved – *required* – a number of concepts that had been central in enlightenment thought (Lang, 1990, p.,169).

Given the historical contingencies of the matter, certain Enlightenment concepts were a necessary condition of the Holocaust. In principle, other concepts might have been; but given the relevant history, it is these (among others) that were necessary.

Two things need emphasizing. First, such an understanding of what might be termed the contingencies of necessary conditions seems very close to the sort of necessary condition I earlier characterized as the "standing out" sort. Second, the Enlightenment serves as such a condition of the Holocaust

because 'it failed' in some way: that is to say, it is a negative necessary condition. Its being a necessary condition is the outcome of something not done, or not achieved. Compare a mechanic's failure to check a car's brake fluid: given the circumstances, the failure was a necessary condition of the brakes' failing and the thus the car's crashing. It is not that this failure directly directly caused the crash; but still, something *not done* played a part in the relevant causal story. This sort of account can be given also of successes. Imagine the mechanic's topping up the brake fluid and the car's then narrowly avoiding a crash: had they not checked and topped up the brake fluid, the car would (very probably) have crashed. It is what the mechanic did that "stands out" in the explanatory story.

One might say, then, that what the Enlightenment achieved made possible the eventual end of religious discrimination against Jews and Roman Catholics in Europe; and at the same time argue, like Lang, that something the Enlightenment failed to achieve -- recognizing other people as rational, autonomous beings unless they met certain conditions -- made possible the Holocaust. Thus Lang argues that Jews were emancipated only if they rejected their identity as Jews and became secular liberal individuals; the Enlightenment offered emancipation only conditionally.

The harm done by the Enlightenment in failing to prevent the Holocaust is thus not directly causal: the Holocaust could have occurred without the

Enlightenment; nor was the Enlightenment sufficient to bring about the Holocaust. The connections are both more complex and less direct. Nor, furthermore, is the harm done by the Enlightenment to be understood in terms of this or that individual person being affected: its harm is more diffuse than that.

Liberal harm

The classical liberal view of what constitutes harm is encapsulated in Mill's claim that if an action does not cause 'perceptible hurt to any assignable individual except himself' then it is not to be prohibited: the harm has to be 'perceptible' (Mill, 1989, p.13) and it has to be an identifiable person who is harmed. Harm is direct and measurable, and what causes it is relatively straightforward: A hits B; B hurts. However, Mill himself sees the difficulty here, though he hardly acknowledges its seriousness:

[H]ow (it may be asked) can any part of the conduct of a member of society be a matter of indifference to the other members? No person is an entirely isolated being; it is impossible for a person to do anything seriously or permanently hurtful to himself, without mischief reaching at least to his near connections, and often far beyond them' (Mill, 1989, p. 80; for discussion, see Brecher, 1997, pp. 151-154).

As Beverley Brown remarked in the context of discussions of pornography in the wake of *Pornography*, 'feminism is concerned with the interests of a constituency of women for whom pornography will have different effects on

different individual women. ...Consequently the level of harm to such an interest is not amenable to liberalism... ’ (Brown, 1981,12). Some actions and practices, that is to say, whatever their direct and identifiable consequences, affect also the attitudes (moral, political and otherwise) of people neither directly affected nor readily individuated. Consider for example the Sexual Offences Reform Act of 1967, which led, however indirectly, to increasing acceptance of gay and lesbian sex and so to more gay and lesbian sex; or the Abortion Act, also of 1967, which led to far more and far more easily obtained abortions than those it specified; or the availability of mobile phones, which has led to changes in public etiquette, the structures of social arrangements and more; or the impact of TV “reality” shows on political processes such as elections. It is not a matter just of unintended consequences (though it is also that) but rather of effects on heretofore quite unrelated attitudes, which in turn make other actions and practices feasible, which in turn leads to the presence of such actions and practices in society.

The Relation of Pornography to Patriarchy

Andrea Dworkin’s central claim about pornography’s relation to what men do – its relation to patriarchy – is just like that. Recall how the book opens:

This is a book about the *meaning* of pornography and the system of power in which pornography exists. Its *particular theme* is the power of men in pornography (Dworkin, 1981, p.9).

This clearly formed the backbone of her later campaigns. So, for example, in

a section on pornographers in 'Against the Male Flood', she makes claims about 'the real flesh-and-blood women in the pictures'; and goes on to claim, concerning written pornography, that 'the pornography [the Marquis de Sade] wrote was an urgent part of the sexual abuse he practised' (Dworkin, 1992, pp. 524, 525). Both of these are straightforwardly empirical claims. The relevant paragraph closes, however, with the quite different sort of claim that 'Pornography, even when it is written, is sex because of the dynamism of the sexual hatred in it; and for pornographers, the sexual abuse of women as commonly understood and pornography are *both* (my emphasis) acts of sexual predation....' (Dworkin, 1992, p. 525). As Wittgenstein observed of ordinary language, so Dworkin here observes of the language of pornography: its meaning is constituted by the use to which it is put. That is how it is possible for the empirical situations she discusses to arise at all. The use, furthermore, of pornography, helps develop the language of pornography... which in turn is put to further use... and so on. Thus one might, following Lang, speak of an affiliation between pornography and patriarchy; or of what pornography helps make possible in and about patriarchy.

Again, Cameron and Frazer argue in similar fashion: 'Even if ... [pornography] does not cause sexual violence it may be criticized of its role in shaping certain forms of desire (and not others).' Its 'place in the culture of transcendence/transgression' is held 'in virtue of several characteristics: the

narratives it constructs, the form in which it renders them and the position it has in our culture as inherently a transgressive genre (though at the same time a pervasive one)' (Cameron and Frazer, 1992, p.376). Since then, our culture has become increasingly sexualized, and pornography remains central to the 'construction of desire' concerned: pornography 'shape(s) it in particular ways' (Cameron and Frazer, 1992, p. 376). What Dworkin insists on – without using the term -- is that pornography *constructs* sexual desire in our culture at least as much as it is itself constructed in response to that constructed sexual desire; in short, that the relation between pornography and sexual desire is dialectical. And so Susan Sontag's extraordinary claim that '(E)xperiences aren't pornographic; only images and representations – structures of the imagination – are' (Sontag, 1969, p. 49) is profoundly mistaken. Pornography's role in respect of sexual desire is the same as that of, for example, the advertising of consumer goods in relation to the desire for such goods. Just as the car advert offers a model – in an *active* sense – of driving cars, so pornography offers 'a model of how to do sex' (Cameron and Frazer, 1992, p. 377). There are two central claims here. First, such a model's appeal to an extent depends on, respectively, how cars are driven and how sex is done in our culture; and at the same time the model offered also affects precisely those practices. Second, 'how cars are driven' and 'how sex is done' includes also how they are not driven and how it is not done; and again in two ways. The first concerns the attraction of transgression, of how cars are not supposed to be driven and of how sex is not supposed to be

done; the second what is ruled out (if anything) by the model *because* it is transgressive.

This second point, about what we rule out because transgressive, is as important as it is rarely noticed. Consider *not* speeding because you might hurt someone; consider *not* doing sex violently for the same reason. As Giorgio Agamben has recently put it at a very general level:

There is, nevertheless, another and more insidious operation of power that does not immediately affect what humans can do – their potentiality – but rather their ‘impotentiality’, that is, what they cannot do, or better, can not do (Agamben, 2011, p. 43).

‘Today’s man,’ Agamben says, ‘... has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do’ (Agamben, 2011, p.44). I am tempted to dub this negative causality: obstacles and barriers to doing something are removed, obstacles and barriers that in certain cases need to remain in place if we are not to do things we ought not to do. Consider President Obama’s commitment to the so-called war on terror blinding him to his capacity to not order the assassination of Osama bin Laden. A practice exists; it is “normal”; in light of the nature of that “normality” another practice is introduced; in turn, this new practice further entrenches that “normality” ... and so on. This is surely all too familiar. So what stands in the way of our understanding what Andrea Dworkin tells us about pornography? Why might pornography be different from all these other

aspects of our everyday lives? For this is precisely what she claims about pornography: it blinds men to things they can not do, to things they have the capacity to not do. Pornography, she tells us, functions in this regard in just the same way as other ideologies, or elements of ideology.

Dworkin's text

Now to Dworkin's text. Certainly some of her fire is directed at the fact (then) that 'real women are required for the depiction' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 200) of women as vile whores. And yet although she insists on the centrality of 'women in makeup and costumes under hot lights...' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 147; and see p. 138ff.), on the real women used to make visual pornography, she immediately, and admittedly rather contradictorily, goes on to quote Suzanne Brøgger to the effect that the 'essence of rape (which is what she takes such photography to be) [...] lies not in the degree of psychological and physical force but in the very attitude toward women that makes disguised or undisguised rape possible' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 138). And so her claims that 'pornography itself is objective and real and central to the male sexual system' (Dworkin, 1981, p.200) and [T]he force depicted in pornography is objective and real because force is so used against women', so that '[T]he debasing of women depicted in pornography are objective and real because women are so used' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 201) might seem ambiguous. While she can be read as simply making a set of empirical claims, however, notice that what she claims is a connection *from* "the real world" *to* pornography.

Pornography, she is telling us, exemplifies patriarchy – as well as helping to keep it in place:

Pornography does not, as some claim, refute the idea that female sexuality is dirty: instead, pornography embodies and exploits this idea; pornography sells and promotes it (Dworkin, 1981, p. 201).

Pornography at once reflects and requires sex as transgressive; and transgressive in a particular way, namely as making use of women merely as means to an end. So while it is the case, she maintains, that '[R]eal women are tied up, stretched, hanged, fucked, gang-banged, whipped, beaten ...' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 201), an appalling effect of the pornography industry that cannot be ignored, pornography's meaning and function are to be found not in that fact but in patriarchy; the realities she describes here are side-effects. What she is claiming is precisely that the role of pornography is to construct male sexual desire, which in turn plays a pivotal patriarchal function. The point is that pornography at once reflects, maintains and promotes an understanding of women's – and, I would add, men's – sexuality and sexual desire which in turn itself reflects, maintains and promotes patriarchy.

One might even describe Dworkin's analysis as implicitly Kantian, rather than either straightforwardly consequentialist or morally and politically liberal:

The new pornography industry is a left-wing industry: promoted especially by the boys of the sixties as simple pleasure, lusty fun, public

sex, the whore brought out of the bourgeois (sic) home into the streets for the democratic consumption of all men... . The dirty little secret of the left-wing pornography industry is *not sex but commerce* Free male sexuality *wants, has a right to*, produces and consumes pornography because pornography is pleasure. ... Capitalism is not wicked or cruel when the commodity is the whore; profit is not wicked or cruel when the alienated worker is a female piece of meat; corporate bloodsucking is not wicked or cruel when the corporations in question, organized crime syndicates, sell cunt[V]iolence by the powerful against the powerless is not wicked or cruel when it is called sex; slavery is not wicked or cruel when the tormented are women, whores, cunts (my emphases) (Dworkin, 1981, pp. 208, 209).

It takes very little further argument to make these sorts of argument against pornography *tout court*, and not just against pornography on grounds of the conditions of its production. Her objection is precisely to what Sontag celebrates in *Story of O*:

The 'perfect submissiveness' that here original lover and then Sir Stephen demand of her echoes the extinction of the self explicitly required of a Jesuit novice or Zen pupil [in both cases men, of course]. O is 'that absent-minded person who has yielded up her will in order to be totally remade,' to be made fit to serve a will far more powerful and authoritative than her own (Sontag, 1969, p. 68).

Quite so. Wickedness and cruelty can occur vicariously and are none the less

wicked or cruel for that, not least in terms of what they do to “the consumer”. Consider here the very different attitudes evinced in proposals to prohibit the purchase, as opposed to the sale, of sex. Dworkin is particularly clear about this in her discussion of women as, historically, ‘chattel property’, in the context of considering gay sex: ‘A man must function as the human center of a chattel-oriented sensibility, surrounded by objects to be used so that he can experience his own power and presence’ (Dworkin, 1981, p.104). So, she argues, ‘it is not surprising that men conspicuously view themselves as authentic persons and the others clustered around them, especially their sexual intimates, especially women and children, as objects’ (Dworkin, 1981, p. 103). True, Dworkin appears not to appreciate the full force of her anti-capitalist, anti-liberal arguments in respect of their implications for the men who consume pornography. But that is unsurprising: compare the desperate contortions Mill has to make to justify not permitting the self-harm of allowing oneself to be sold into slavery (Mill, 1989, pp. 102-103). Thus, while Dworkin is right to castigate much of Lasch’s defence of de Sade, she misses the important point he makes -- and to which she might have helped herself -- when she criticizes his ‘peculiar’ interpretation of de Sade as perceiving, ‘more clearly than the feminists, that all freedoms under capitalism come in the end to the same thing, the same universal obligation to enjoy and be enjoyed’ (Dworkin, 1981, p. 99, quoting Lasch, 1979, p.133). On the other hand, she also gives voice to a profoundly anti-liberal position in the concluding paragraphs of her discussion of what ‘men and boys’ are, and

pornography's function as at once expressing and maintaining such a sort of masculinity:

Everything in life is part of it. Nothing is off in its own corner, isolated from the rest. While on the surface this may seem self-evident, the favorite conceit of male culture is that experience can be fractured, literally its bones split, and that one can examine the splinters as if they were not part of the bone, or the bone as if it were not part of the body. This conceit replicates in its values and methodology the sexual reductionism of the male and is derived from it. ... So the scientist can work on bomb or virus, the artist on poem, the photographer on picture, with no appreciation of its meaning outside itself; and even reduce each of these things to an abstract element and nothing else – literally attribute meaning to or discover meaning in nothing else (Dworkin, 1981, p. 67).

What is this if not a clear critique of the empiricism, both theoretical and methodological, that historically underlies and makes possible the liberalism that is its normative outcome (see Brecher, 1997, pp. 15-52)?

Two points are particularly important in her – at this point -- anti-liberal analysis. First, what she claims is independent of whether you think sexual desire is “hard-wired” or constructed: if the former, then her point is to be understood as one about its forms; if the latter, then as a point about sexual desire itself. Either way, it need not depend on any essentialism. The

biological-sounding claims she makes in the text about boys, men and the role of the penis (Dworkin, 1981, ch. 2, pp. 48-69) probably justify the description of at least this passage as essentialist. But her general argument does not depend on essentialism: it can as well be understood as social constructionist. Indeed her active legal proposals for how we – or rather, people in the USA of the 1980s -- might set about at least starting to deal with it sit extremely uneasily with any essentialism about male sexuality. Second, what she claims is something that liberalism cannot recognize, going as it does against its simplistic, cause/effect, unidirectional and individualistic understanding of harm (and indeed of benefit) and its parallel inability to grasp what ideology – not least its own -- is and how it functions.

Let me say more about this second point. Neither harm nor good attach solely to identifiable individuals. To go back to my earlier examples, the impact of the Sexual Offences and Abortion Acts of 1967: one way of generalizing from these is to suggest that harm and good can be brought about not just directly, but indirectly, through the effect of something (an action; a practice; a belief) on the range of what comes to enter the moral, political and other contexts, on what comes to be regarded as within or beyond the possibly acceptable. That, in fact, is how moral change tends to come about: think of women's liberation or slavery. The moral climate sets the parameters of moral possibility (Brecher, 1997, pp. 147-159). That is what Dworkin has in mind when she says things like these:

This is a book about the meaning of pornography and the system of power in which pornography exists (the book's opening sentence) (Dworkin, 1981, p.9).

(Quoting Kate Millett): Our self-contempt originates in this: in knowing we are cunt (Dworkin, 1981, p.199).

He comes to the pornography a believer; he goes away from it a missionary (Dworkin, 1981, p.202).

The metaphysics of male domination is that women are whores (Dworkin, 1981, p.203).

So when she ends the book by saying that 'We will know that we are free when the pornography no longer exists' (Dworkin, 1981, p. 204), she is not intending to make the causal claim that getting rid of pornography will liberate women; rather, we shall know that women have been liberated only when pornography has disappeared. For pornography is – whatever else it also is – at once a symptom of oppression as well as one of its vehicles. Of course this is hard to express in liberal language, because liberalism cannot recognize the complex interplay between the social and the individual or the place of the moral climate in making things possible or impossible, more or less likely.

Conclusion: Dworkin's Anti-Liberalism

The standard objections to Dworkin's central argument fall, as Cameron and Frazer showed long ago. It is not a simple matter of pornography's causal impact : we can be indirectly harmed, as when someone insults the person on the supermarket checkout: although the insult is not aimed at me, I am insulted by its being directed at a person who is not in a position to answer back. In the same way, their having to take a menial job because they feel, rightly, that it is one they cannot refuse, is an offence to me – and it is an offence to me whether or not they themselves perceive it as offensive to them. Compare marriage, the family, charity; or the experience of shame one might have at someone else's action, as when British troops torture a man to death in Iraq. Nor is consent relevant: for, far from people's wants justifying their acts, the question at issue is the moral justification of their wants and – therefore – the moral climate within which such wants come to be had. Nor will it do to claim of pornography that it is a game: for while as a genre it has similarities to a game (rules, moves and the like) it is also – and again as a genre – closely connected with “real life”. To put it crudely: it is not *just* a game. Those who deny the seriousness of pornography in maintaining patriarchy cannot rely on the figure of pornography as “playful sex” to do so: for what “playful sex” might be in another world and what this “playful” sex is here, now, are quite different things.

Nor does pornography have directly to abuse those it depicts in order to be abusive. As Dworkin herself puts it in a later discussion, 'Pornography, even when written, is sex because of the dynamism of the sexual hatred in it; and for pornographers, the sexual abuse of women as commonly understood and pornography are both acts of sexual predation, which is how they live. ... The pornographers are the secret police of male supremacy: keeping women subordinate through intimidation and assault' (Dworkin, 1992, p.525). The form of her argument here is that of standard anti-liberal analyses of all sorts of everyday phenomena, from the buying and selling of body parts for transplants to working on the supermarket check-out. So, for instance, one might argue that 'for free-market employers, the economic exploitation of people as commonly understood and standard employment contracts are both acts of (economic) predation (and more), which is how they live'; or that 'for charities, the abuse of the poor as commonly understood and charitable work are both acts of exploitation, which is how they live'. And in both cases, they, with many others, 'are the secret police of neo-liberal capitalism: keeping people subordinate through intimidation and assault'. Whether or not one agrees with (any of) these arguments, how they work and what they claim is clear. The same is the case of Dworkin's arguments against pornography.

Finally, the phenomena of gay porn and of "women's porn" do nothing to undermine her case. These genres are takes on, imitations of, male porn that

themselves reflect and maintain patriarchy no less than does male porn. The “relations” portrayed are no less about power and domination and the realities at once reflected and furthered no different; and the underlying trope of domination is irredeemably sexist. To put this another way: the liberation of women is about more than the sex they themselves do or do not engage in; and it cannot take place in the absence of a liberation of men from their patriarchal role and function.

Dworkin wrote about the world she lived in. What gay porn, lesbian porn, women’s porn, whatever porn might be like in some other world is all beside the point. In a non-patriarchal world, porn could not be what porn (now) is. In a free world, or an equal world, it would not be a use of people, whether of individual women (the models), individual customers (the consumers) or of customers in general (liberalism and capitalism). Whether it could then still be pornography is another question. Transgressive sex, one might speculate, might include all sorts of representations and actions – if the transgressive is sexually important in just any conceivable social set-up. The issue is what it would transgress in a society very different from ours: for pornography requires to be transgressive – whether acceptably or not – to constitute pornography. Questions of a similar form could of course be asked about a range of phenomena besides pornography. They should be asked, just as the question Dworkin asks about the current pornographic structure of sexuality needs to be asked.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Vicky Margree for her comments on an earlier version of this essay; and to Mark Devenney for drawing Agamben's essay to my attention.

6245 words

References

- T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer (1973 [1947]) *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (London: Verso).
- G. Agamben (2011) 'On what we can not do', in idem, *Nudities* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press), pp. 43-45.
- A. Assiter (1989) *Pornography, Feminism and the Individual* (London: Pluto, 1989)
- A. Assiter and A. Carol (1993) *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures* (London: Pluto).
- B. Brecher (1997) *Bob Getting What You Want? A Critique of Liberal Morality* (London: Routledge).
- B. Brown (1981) 'A feminist interest in pornography – some modest proposals', *m/f*, 5/6, 5-12.
- D. Cameron and E. Frazer (1992) 'On the question of pornography and sexual violence: moving beyond cause and effect', in C. Itzin (ed.) *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties: a Radical New View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 359-383.
- D. Cornell (ed.) (2000) *Feminism and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- A. Dworkin (1992) 'Against the male flood' in C. Itzin (ed.) *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties: a Radical New View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,) pp. 515-535.

A. Dworkin (1981), *Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press,).

A. Dworkin and C. McKinnon (1992) *Model Antipornography Civil Rights*

Ordinance: available at

<<http://www.efalk.org/falk/Censorship.html#ordinance>>. (For the Bill

introduced in Massachusetts based on this model see

<<http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/OrdinanceMassComplete.html>>

). Both accessed 1 May 2011.

C. Itzin (ed.) (1992) *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties: a Radical New View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

S. Kappeler, 'Pornography: the representation of power' in C. Itzin (ed.) *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties: a Radical New View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 88-101.

B. Lang, (1990), *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago, Chicago University Press).

C. Lasch (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books).

J. S. Mill (1989 [1869]) *On Liberty*, S. Collini (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

C. Pankhurst, 'The government and white slavery', *The Suffragette*, 18 and 25 April 1913, available at

<<http://calmarchive.londonmet.ac.uk/DServe/DServe.exe?dsqApp=Archive&dsqCmd=Index.tcl>>.

J. Rhys (1971 [1930]) *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

J. Rhys (1969a [1939]) *Good Morning, Midnight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

J. Rhys (1973 [1928]) *Quartet* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

J. Rhys (1969b [1934]) *Voyage in the Dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).

J. Schmidt (2000) 'What Enlightenment Project?', *Political Theory*, 28, 734-757.

S. Sontag (1969) 'The pornographic imagination', in idem, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg).