



Dworkin, Andrea (1946-2005)

by Linda Rapp

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Controversial radical feminist Andrea Dworkin wrote and spoke extensively regarding the cultural subjugation of women. She was particularly vigorous in her opposition to pornography. While some considered her a heroine for her attacks on patriarchy, others found her polemical pronouncements too extreme to be taken seriously.

Andrea Dworkin, born September 26, 1946, came from a middle-class family in Camden, New Jersey. Rather curiously, the woman who would later decry men as moral cretins was close to her father, whom she credited with making her aware of the importance of social activism, and to her younger brother, but she did not get along well with her mother.

In her book *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War against Women* (1997), Dworkin recalled traumatic events of her childhood, including being raped by a stranger at age nine and seduced by one of her high school teachers.

Dworkin enrolled as a literature major at Bennington College in Vermont in 1964. While studying there, she periodically traveled to New York City to participate in protests against the war in Vietnam. On one such occasion in February 1965 she was arrested and held in the Women's House of Detention for several days, during which time she was subjected to humiliating strip searches and painful examinations by doctors. Upon being released, she took her story to the press. An investigation of the jail ensued, and it was eventually closed.

Dworkin left Bennington in 1968, having completed all her degree requirements except for her undergraduate thesis, which she submitted the following year to earn her diploma.

On leaving college, Dworkin traveled first to Greece, where, she said, she supported herself through prostitution, and then to the Netherlands. There she entered into a disastrous marriage in 1969. Dworkin stated that she suffered brutal physical abuse at the hands of her husband. The couple divorced after three years.

In a 1985 interview Dworkin claimed that the pornography that she and her husband read was a cause of the domestic violence, saying "it helped give me the wrong idea of what a woman was supposed to be for a man."

Dworkin returned to the United States to pursue a writing career. Her first book, *Woman Hating*, was published in 1974. She would go on to write a dozen more, including several works of fiction. Dworkin believed that her difficulty in getting her novels into print was because of "publishers who feared the power of *Playboy*," but poor reviews and weak sales of those that did appear were more likely important factors.

Dworkin's best-known work is probably *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981). Her crusade against pornography during the 1980s brought her to national attention. Wearing denim overalls, her trademark

outfit, and with bullhorn in hand, she led marches in cities around the country.

With lawyer Catherine A. MacKinnon, whom she met while both were teaching at the University of Minnesota in 1983, Dworkin wrote ordinances defining pornography as "the sexually explicit subordination of women" and making its sale illegal as a violation of women's civil rights. Such measures were passed by the city councils of Indianapolis and Minneapolis. The mayor of Minneapolis vetoed the bill, however, and a federal court in Indiana struck down the law there. The United States Supreme Court upheld that ruling in 1986.

Dworkin's stance put her on the "anti-sex" side of the lesbian sex wars of the 1980s and pitted her against "pro-sex" writers such as Pat (now Patrick) Califia, Jewelle Gomez, Joan Nestle, and Dorothy Allison. Also opposing her views were civil libertarians and many feminists who feared that Dworkin's sweeping pronouncements might impede the progress of the women's movement.

Many gay men were also bewildered by the fact that Dworkin's anti-pornography crusade, which justified its attempted abridgement of civil liberties on the grounds that pornography harmed women, also targeted gay pornography in which no women at all were featured.

On the other hand, Dworkin drew support from political conservatives, including antigay activists, who not only joined her in denouncing pornography but also shared her opinion that sexual liberation had been harmful to women and to society in general.

In 1985 Dworkin, who publicly identified herself as a lesbian, filed a \$150,000,000 libel suit against *Hustler* magazine over sexually explicit cartoons referring to her lesbianism. Dworkin lost but pursued the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which rejected her appeal without comment in 1989.

In the 1990s and beyond, Dworkin was less in the public eye but published several more books, including *Scapegoat: The Jews, Israel, and Women's Liberation* (2000), in which she suggested that perhaps women should have a country of their own, and *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Militant Feminist* (2002).

For the last three decades of her life Dworkin shared a home with John Stoltenberg, who identifies as a gay man. In the 1980s he founded a group called Men Against Pornography and supported Dworkin in her crusade. He is also the author of several books, including *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (1989), and has worked as a magazine editor. The couple married in 1998.

Dworkin suffered from various physical problems in her last years. As a result of obesity, she developed arthritis in her knees and had to undergo several surgeries.

Dworkin died on April 9, 2005 in Washington, D.C., leaving a very mixed legacy. Some found her perception of the situation of women brilliant, while others considered her a man-hater, a charge that she once had weakly countered by saying, "I don't hate men, not that they don't deserve it. It's just not in my nature."

Dworkin's extreme position alienated many people. In 1985 Eleanor Smeal, then president of the National Organization for Women, said of Dworkin's campaign against pornography, "There is almost a fascist overtone to this thing." Cathy Young wrote in the *Boston Globe* in 2005 that "[Dworkin's] melodramatic assertion that the everyday life of women in our culture is an 'atrociousness' could only trivialize real atrocities. Her depiction of all women as perpetual victims--'Being female in this world is having been robbed of the potential for human choice by men who love to hate us'--is profoundly demeaning."

Dworkin may have been sincere in her desire to improve the lives of women, but many people disagreed with her vision for achieving this.

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