What Wild Ecstasy
—The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution
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Chapter 5

Intimations of Immorality

AT THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN SHE SPENT FOUR DAYS IN THE WOMEN'S HOUSE OF Detention in New York City after being arrested in a demonstration against the Vietnam War. Two doctors administered such a brutal internal examination that she hemorrhaged for fifteen days.

An alumna of rad-chic Bennington College in the mid-sixties, when the first alarums of women's liberation were being sounded, she took a cynical view of feminist consciousness-raising, dismissing Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as a book for "housewives." She also thought of herself not as homosexual or heterosexual, but as an artist. Her favorites were the "wild men" of letters—Dostoyevsky, Whitman, Baudelaire, Rimbaud—and the lesbian Greek poet Sappho.

The daughter of first-generation Russian Jews, she had grown up in Jersey City estranged from her domineering mother. Her father, a teacher who worked nights in the post office to cover his wife's medical bills, inculcated in her a love and respect for ideas—one of them being an absolute commitment to the First Amendment. An overweight ugly duckling, with a preference for bib overalls, she refused to wear makeup or conform in any other way to society's idea of femininity. In 1969 she fell in love and married a left-wing radical like herself. At last she felt free of her mother's "ignorant demands."

Marriage, though, turned out to be a hell unlike anything she ever imagined. Her husband raped her, routinely beat her, kicked her in the stomach, punched her in the breasts and burned them with cigarettes, and mercilessly battered her about the legs with a piece of wood. Every day, every night, she cried, screamed, begged for mercy, for a little love and kindness. Her first

ught, on waking up from a battering that left her unconscious, was de- that she was still alive.

At twenty-five, almost catatonic, she somehow worked up the determina- to walk out. Desperately needing money, she agreed to carry a briefcase of heroin through customs for a junkie. When the deal fell through, she nced her escape by stealing. A year later, out of nowhere, her ex-husband ang on her again, hitting and kicking her, then disappeared again. She be- n to think of him as a "ghost with a fist."

Yet she also thought of herself now as "one year old, an infant born out of corpse, still with the smell of death on her, but hating death." Hating death ranslated into hating men. Her name was Andrea Dworkin, and within the ecade she would become the most celebrated, outrageous, and influential nemy of the male sex that America, or perhaps any country, had ever pro- uced.

After leaving her husband, Dworkin tried to support herself as a writer, ontributing to obscure magazines and beginning work on a book entitled *Woman Hating*. Well-paying assignments from the women's magazines dis- gusted her, and she turned them all down.

At the time, she also felt deeply masochistic—not so much in a personal ense, but as part of her lot as a woman. Yet one thing she knew—she had not inherited those masochistic feelings from her parents. Trying to determine where they did come from, she turned to a modern SM classic then enjoying early renown, *Story of O* by the pseudonymous Pauline Réage.

From that beginning Dworkin embarked on an investigation of other pornography, as well as fairy tales and such refinements of male cruelty to- ward women as Chinese foot binding. During this period she also came to a deep realization of herself as a woman and established a new, healthier rela- tionship with her mother. She also read the first seminal feminist tract of the decade, Kate Millett's blockbuster *Sexual Politics,* published in the fall of 1970, which converted her fully to the feminist cause. Heavily indebted to Wilhelm Reich's 1930 classic, *The Sexual Revolution,* and Simone de Beau- voir's *The Second Sex*—though she cited the French author only twice—Mil- lett painted a nightmare vision of endless female subordination to and suffering at the hands of men. "Sexual dominion [is] perhaps the most perva- sive ideology of our culture and provides the most fundamental concept of power," Millett wrote, claiming that the status of woman was that of "chat- tel" perpetuated through marriage—"an exchange of the female's domestic service and (sexual) consortium in return for financial support." Millett vir- tually coined the term "sex object" and the idea of sexism as applied by men to women. The way men kept women subordinate, Millett argued, echoing Friedan, was by making an elaborate pretense of placing them on a pedestal

The product of a midwestern convent education, Millett had been molested by an older man when she was thirteen. For ten years she kept her secret. Then one day she joined a group of women friends who were driving downtown, and the conversation turned to rape and exhibitionism. Every one of the eight women in the car was able to recount an experience similar to her own. She began to perceive that women were constantly the victims of male violence. Women did not attack women, men did. Violence had become sexually institutionalized in the United States. "Men equate their power with their balls," she wrote, "so when they think they're losing their power, they start screaming that they're losing their balls."

Though Millett's heaviest fire was directed against Freud, her most outlandish suggestion was to call for the abolition of the family, a social institution virtually coextensive with history. One reader who believed in that message, however, was Andrea Dworkin, whose writings and lifestyle took up where *Sexual Politics* left off.

"[Rape] remains our primary model for heterosexual relating . . . a right of marriage," Dworkin now wrote, revealing a pornographic streak of her own that was to deepen over the years. By contrast, "Being a lesbian means . . . there is an erotic passion and intimacy which comes of touch and taste, a wild, salty tenderness, a wet sweet sweat, our breasts, our mouths, our cunts, our intertangled hairs . . . a sensual passion as deep and mysterious as the sea." She found strength and inspiration not so much in lesbianism as in a radical man-hating ideology, which sought to explain why all men did what they did to all women.

Radical feminism was Dworkin's way out of madness, though not necessarily back into sanity. At the time, the movement was splintering into liberal and radical factions. The liberal wing, whether it found pornography distasteful or appealing, was above all committed to the First Amendment and leaned away from characterizing all women as victims and all men as villains. But the right wing took issue with the First Amendment's protection of pornography, leaning toward a polarized view of male and female sexuality that demonized men and idealized women and dismissing liberal feminists as co-conspirators in their own enslavement.

In April 1974 *Woman Hating* appeared. Dworkin hoped its publication would establish her as a writer of recognized talent, but she was disappointed. The following year she earned less than $2,000. *The Village Voice* refused to publish her essays and reviewed her work with seething contempt, and she was scorned by the Village's left-wing lesbian community. In succeeding years Dworkin continued to have difficulty placing her work.

The turning point, both in Dworkin's life and in the history of radical feminism, came in October 1974 when she spoke at a three-hour New York City "speakout" on sexual issues, values, and experiences sponsored by the

National Organization for Women and attended by eleven hundred women. The title of her talk was "Renouncing Sexual 'Equality,' " and afterward she received a standing ten-minute ovation. Many in the audience were crying and shaking. It was not the last time she would inspire such a reaction.

Extremely skillful in evoking pathos, Dworkin often succeeded in her talks and debates in bringing women in the audience to tears by vividly condemning the "millions and millions of pictures of real women bound, gagged, and hanging from meathooks for men's entertainment," as she later wrote and lectured. Shaming her liberal listeners, she insisted that "men do to women in pornography what men do to political prisoners in those third world countries we're all against. How many women's bodies does it take to equal one injury to one male body?"

A fundamental tenet championed by Dworkin and other radical feminists was that male sexuality depended for its pleasure on victimizing others. Dworkin had a high stake in maintaining this patronizing view of female sexuality—that women, when they were not victims of rape, were essentially whores. In her books and lectures she claimed that not marriage but sexual intercourse should be abolished because it was the cause of many if not most of women's problems.

As for men, they were, not surprisingly, mere "creeps" who wanted only to "occupy," "violate," "invade," or "colonize" women's bodies. "Physically, the woman in intercourse is a space inhabited, a literal territory occupied literally: occupied even if there has been no resistance, no force; even if the occupied person said yes please, yes hurry, yes . . ."

It seemed unlikely that Dworkin would be able to find a man with whom she could live on her terms. But then a palm reader told her she would. In 1974 Dworkin met John Stoltenberg, an openly gay magazine editor who had a master's degree in divinity from Union Theological Seminary, at a meeting of the War Resisters League. They began living together, in a brother-sister arrangement intended to demonstrate Dworkin's contention that a union between a man and woman need not be penis centered. The two also agreed that each could have sex partners outside the relationship as long as they were not brought home to the four-room co-op they jointly owned, making their sexless union an open nonmarriage—a sexual first of sorts.

Dworkin took charge of the fun aspects of their lives: picnics in Prospect Park, trips to the theater. The second most radical issue in their lives after pornography was housework. Frequently, after Stoltenberg washed a dish, Dworkin good-naturedly returned it for a more thorough cleansing. What Dworkin most feared was losing the ability to make decisions—even in such minor matters as what kind of toothpaste to buy. Stoltenberg and Dworkin solved that problem by buying two different tubes.

In 1977 Dworkin met a divorced young law professor named Catharine

MacKinnon, who shared her notion that sexual intercourse was an "aggressive intrusion" into a woman's body. Incorruptible, brimming with righteousness and limitless zeal, MacKinnon was an attractive blonde who wore tailored suits and gold jewelry, in sharp contrast with Dworkin's studied dishevelment. Endowed with ferocious legal cunning, she was to play Robespierre to Dworkin's pamphleteering, emotional Marat in the radical-feminist Reign of Terror against men that was to wash over the country in the coming decade.

A child of privilege, MacKinnon grew up in rural Minnesota, the daughter of George E. MacKinnon, a staunch Republican and a member of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, who once wrote an opinion saying sexual activity in the workplace was "normal and expectable." After earning a Ph.D. in political science at Yale and graduating from Yale Law School, MacKinnon worked with the Black Panthers and opposed the Vietnam War.

Though not among the first women lawyers to become involved in the issue of sexual harassment, which first entered the cultural lexicon around 1975, she began to pioneer a novel approach toward the issue—seeing it, too, as a form of sex discrimination—soon after meeting Dworkin in the late seventies. In support of that contention, a 1976 *Redbook* survey reported that 88 percent of women responding said they had experienced overt sexual harassment and regarded it as a serious work-related problem. A later survey of more than twenty thousand federal government workers showed that 42 percent of women and 15 percent of men said they had been sexually harassed in the previous two years, with 78 percent of the harassers male. Harassment behavior ranged from suggestive conversation to touching.

Above all, Dworkin and MacKinnon agreed that pornography was at the root of all evil suffered by women. According to Dworkin, not only did sex itself have to move away from its "penis-centricity," but pornography could no longer be seen simply as the harmless objectification of women for the entertainment of men. That was because men's sexuality, meaning their very nature, was rooted in the victimization of others. Women, as a result, lived their entire lives as victims, whether they knew it or not.

MacKinnon and Dworkin began giving speeches and lobbying together for antipornography ordinances. Yet their writings continued to seem oddly pornographic in their detail. "The fuck, the fist, the street, the chains, the poverty are the hard end," MacKinnon wrote. "Hostility and contempt, or arousal of master to slave, together with awe and vulnerability, or arousal of slave to master . . ."

Alarmed by the rhetoric and activism of the radical feminists, liberal feminists belatedly organized into anticensorship groups. As American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) president Nadine Strossen pointed out, most liberal

feminists opposed censoring sexually oriented speech even when they found it offensive—recognizing that censorship would ultimately play into the agenda of male-dominated institutions intent on reversing progress in abortion rights, contraception, and other gains toward full sexual equality made by the women's movement.

Liberal feminists also disputed any empirical link between sex crimes and pornography and feared that forcing pornography underground would bring out the worst in both the manufacturers of XXX-rated materials and those intent on suppressing them—as the analogous example of Prohibition suggested.

Among the most notable feminist groups opposed to the MacKinnon-Dworkin tide were the Feminists' Anti-Censorship Taskforce, formed in 1984 by the poet Adrienne Rich, Columbia University professor Carole Vance, Betty Friedan, and others; the Feminists for Free Expression; and the National Coalition Against Censorship's Working Group on Women, Censorship, and "Pornography," the quotation marks in the latter's title underscoring the word's inherent ambiguity.

THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION ever undertaken of the effects of hard-core pornography on human criminal behavior was contained in the 1970 Report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography initiated by Lyndon Johnson shortly before he left office. (Nine "technical reports" were subsequently published in 1971–1972.) Soon after Richard Nixon was inaugurated as his successor, he added another name to the panel—Charles Keating, a wealthy Catholic investor and a founder of the Cincinnati-based Citizens for Decency in Literature, the most vociferous antipornography group in the nation.

The commission spent two years researching the extent of the sexually oriented motion picture, book, and magazine industries, mail-order erotica, hard-core pornography, the relationship between the manufacture and distribution of pornography to organized crime, community exposure to erotica, and even information on patrons of adult bookstores and movies.

The report, submitted to Nixon in April 1970 in ten volumes, found no substantial basis for the belief that exposure to erotica caused sex crimes or bad moral character. Volume VII, subtitled *Erotica and Antisocial Behavior,* reported on nine studies on the relationship between explicit sexual material and criminal sexual acts. None found any reason to conclude that pornography encouraged sex crimes; in fact, the available data pointed to quite the opposite.

Dr. C. Eugene Walker of Baylor University, for example, had interviewed a sample of jailed sex offenders, along with a control sample of nonoffenders.

The biggest component by far was the thousands of adult bookstores and peep shows around country. A large adult bookstore in Times Square easily grossed $10,000 a day, and the Los Angeles Police Department estimated that the city's sex merchants did $125 million a year. But even such impressive figures did not add up to more than about $1 billion total, and some of them were probably inflated. Most bookstores and peep shows were substantially smaller and less lucrative than those in Times Square. A more realistic assessment of soft-core's and hard-core's combined annual gross revenues was probably in the neighborhood of $1.5 to $2 billion.

In any case, whatever the government was doing to control the porn industry was not enough to satisfy the extremist wing of WAP, which was headed by Marcia Womongold, a Boston feminist who advocated the use of noxious chemicals like butyl mercaptan to close down a store and herself shot out the window of a Harvard Square bookstore selling men's magazines. Not all WAP members endorsed her methods, but all endorsed her goals.

All this discontent culminated in October 1979 with a major antiporn march in Times Square, site of the nation's heaviest concentration of commercial sex. Five thousand marchers, mostly women, showed up. The march underscored the very real aggravation many women felt about their role in society. Abortion rights and equal pay were still problems, solutions were slow in coming, and this new issue helped focus their disaffection. Opinion surveys also showed the country was becoming more conservative, with only 8 percent of high school students favoring couples living together before marriage. Back in 1971, 47 percent had approved.

By this time WAP had succeeded in removing *Hustler* from two stores in Oakland, California, closed showings of erotic movies like *The Story of O* in several cities, and forced Atlantic Records to take down a billboard advertising the Rolling Stones' *Black and Blue* album.

But the simplism of the antipornography movement also alarmed many feminists, such as Nancy Borman, editor of *Majority Report,* one of the most respected feminist weeklies, who wrote: "An antipornography campaign avoids the real feminist issues of economic oppression and abortion. . . . If feminists go on this self-righteous campaign against pornography the way Carrie Nation did against alcohol, the real causes of violence will be avoided, just like the real causes of alcoholism were avoided by the Prohibitionists."

Nonetheless, the WAP minority proved so successful that for nearly a decade the pornography issue overshadowed more important feminist concerns. Some, like Steinem, clumsily explained the problem away by trying to draw a distinction between erotica and pornography: "Pornography is the product of woman hatred, marked by cruelty and violence, and shouldn't be confused with erotica, which is rooted in the idea of free will and love." That distinction was popular within the ranks of WAP because it allowed them to

acknowledge the sexual liberation movement among women. Ironically, Anaïs Nin became a popular "eroticist" of antipornography feminists, even though she had been the lover of the despised male chauvinist Henry Miller and, like the madam in a literary brothel, had presided over one of the major pornography-producing cartels of the American 1930s and 1940s. Being literary, though, Nin porn was so much nicer than the products sold in the sleazy precincts of Times Square, and it also had the merit—even though much of it was about incest and SM—of being written by a woman.

WAPers denied that pornography could be a harmless entertainment or a healthy avenue for the release of sexual tension. Rather, it was a "theory" of which rape was the "practice" (Robin Morgan), "antifemale propaganda" (Brownmiller), "the ideological basis for the systematic persecution of females by males" (Womongold). Brownmiller supported Chief Justice Warren Burger's majority opinion in the pivotal 1973 *Miller* v. *California* case that called the inclusion of "obscene material" "a misuse of the great guarantees of free speech and free press." She claimed, "We live quite comfortably with a host of free speech abridgments," citing restrictions on false advertising and on shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater. "Restriction on the display of pornography belongs in this category," she maintained.

But if pornography was theory, ideology, or propaganda, then censoring it meant censoring a political idea, freedom of speech. In response to such fuzzy thinking, Harvard law professor (and *Penthouse* columnist) Alan Dershowitz shrewdly pointed out: "The more they say pornography is a form of racist, sexist propaganda, the more they support the argument against censoring it. Protection for propaganda is the core of the First Amendment."

In Middle America, school boards and libraries were under constant attack for stocking books like Studs Terkel's *Working,* the sex education film *Achieving Sexual Maturity,* Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex,* works by Harlan Ellison, Kurt Vonnegut, and J. D. Salinger, video games, and countless other scabrous and scatological amusements. In a tradition going back to Anthony Comstock, not to mention the Roman Catholic Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum,* moral vigilantes were everywhere.

According to Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, "radical feminism" was the only true form of feminism because it alone spoke for all women; liberal feminism, they claimed, promoted the interests of only a relatively few privileged women while helping to conceal the oppression and abuse of the vast and silenced majority. "If this is feminism, it deserves to die," Dworkin contemptuously declared.

Yet MacKinnon avoided biological determinism, refraining from universal generalizations about the victimization of women and the villainy of men.

Rather, she grounded her position by asserting the primacy of social forces over biological ones. Gender, in her view, was a system of dominance rather than difference. Her point was not to emphasize the familiar feminist distinction between sex and gender, according to which sex referred to nature, biology, maleness or femaleness and gender to culture, social norms, and masculinity or femininity. MacKinnon regarded that distinction as a liberal construct.

"On the first day that matters, dominance was achieved," she wrote, "probably by force." Men, the dominant gender, had assumed the power to define both differences and "the differences gender makes." Current understandings of sexual differences, in her view, were masculine constructions, leading her to conclude that the biological and social were inseparable in this area. Thus she used the words "sex" and "gender" interchangeably. In her usage the word "male" functioned as "a social and political concept, not a biological attribute; it is a status socially conferred upon a person because of a condition of birth." At the same time, men were also capable of becoming feminists.

Consequently, MacKinnon argued, radical feminism had a "dominance perspective," while liberal feminism adopted a "difference perspective." The former revealed aspects of public policy "invisible to liberal feminists"—for example, that allegedly gender-neutral reforms sometimes even contributed to the subordination of women. A case in point: sex discrimination laws, which benefited only those women whose biographies approximated the male norm. Most women's injuries from male dominance were so deep, they appeared merely as natural sex differences. The inability of sex discrimination laws to address those injuries meant, in effect, that such laws ended up rationalizing inequity.

MacKinnon was also critical of attempts to ground the right to abortion on an alleged gender-neutral right to privacy. From the dominance perspective, the so-called private realm had never guaranteed women a sphere in which they could act as autonomous individuals. Rather, the distinction between public and private provided an ideological rationale for allowing men an arena in which to exercise their power over women free from the restraints imposed, at least theoretically, in the public realm. In the private realm that often meant forced sex, which in turn created the need for abortions that the feminization of poverty often made unavailable.

Yet the biggest contrast between a "dominance" and a "difference" perspective was over pornography. MacKinnon claimed pornography was a central mechanism of women's subordination because it eroticized the relation of domination between men and women and simultaneously reinforced the prevailing definitions of gender and sex. "Violation of the powerless is part of what is sexy about sex, as well as central in the meaning of male and female," she declared.

If dominance was experienced as erotic, through pornography-induced orgasm, that made gender inequality appear natural and rendered it pleasurable not only to men, but also (though not equally) to women. Allegedly gender-neutral rights to freedom of speech affected men and women very differently because the sexes were not "similarly situated" in relation to pornography. As a result, "the free speech of men silences the free speech of women." In the antipornography ordinances that she was later to coauthor, MacKinnon defined pornography as sex discrimination, made actionable through civil rights law. This difference in ideology was to become the driving wedge that split feminism and transformed pornography into the battleground of a feminist civil war throughout the eighties. Spoiling for a fight, MacKinnon taunted feminists who opposed censorship by comparing them to "house niggers who sided with the masters," and organizations like the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT) to labor scabs and Uncle Toms.