LUST AND DISGUST
A short history of prudery, feminist and otherwise

By Laura Kipnis

Discussed in this essay:

Intercourse, by Andrea Dworkin. Basic Books. 315 pages. $15.95.


Sex is bad for women, and I mean bad in every sense of the word: from the dismal quality of the experience itself, to the lasting harms—psychological, social, existential—it inflicts. At least this is a premise with a certain traction in the cultural imagination, and it seems in no danger of losing its hold, even in an era that simultaneously pays frequent lip service to the polar-opposite premise—sexual parity between men and women is now a fact, and sex is finally good for women, so let’s all party. In short, there are many conflicting stories circulating about what women are getting up to in bed, and how much they’re really enjoying it, and whether proclaiming enjoyment is even a reliable indicator of anything when it’s a woman doing the proclaiming; we are the sex, after all, notorious for faking enjoyment. In fact, for women, even good sex—or sex you mistakenly thought was good—may be bad for you, in ways you can’t calculate.

The literature of bad sex is rather extensive (as is bad writing about sex, though these aren’t necessarily the same thing), and a mainstay of the genre is the cautionary tale aimed at dissuading women from having sex, or sex of the wrong kind, or with the wrong people. The arguments vary, the politics may vary, but the message keeps coming around again, like a hit single on a top-forty station. Here are three recent variations on the theme spanning two decades, since one—and by far the most interesting, despite its advanced age—is a twentieth-anniversary edition of Andrea Dworkin’s radical feminist classic, Intercourse. In case you’ve forgotten, Dworkin was the notorious anti-pornography activist and theorist most famous for having said that all intercourse is rape, though she claimed she never actually said that. The reprint arrives with a new introduction by Ariel Levy, the author of Female Chauvinist Pigs (2005). Levy was less a fan of Dworkin’s in Pigs, labeling her an extremist, which is undoubtedly true (yet also a little backhanded given that Levy was reprising so many of Dworkin’s arguments, albeit in less extreme tones). But I too must admit that I never had much use for Dworkin, and have ranted against her in print on a few occasions—though I now must further admit that I found rereading her this time around strangely enjoyable. She’s the great female refusenik, and just because sex disgusted her it doesn’t mean she isn’t often funny and even profound on the subject.

Previously I was under the impression that it was only heterosexual sex that disgusted Dworkin. But as Levy’s introduction helpfully informs, Dworkin—who died in 2005 at the age of fifty-eight—may have proclaimed herself a lesbian, yet she was not known to have logged any hours in the actual enterprise, either romantically or sexually. Nevertheless, clearly she thought about sex a lot. Additionally, she was an unorthodox enough lesbian to have loved and secretly married a...
man, her soulmate, with whom she cohabited for over three decades; he, too, was gay, and happened to have health insurance. Happily, Dworkin found the kind of love she either believed in or could tolerate: one that didn’t involve bodies, the messy meeting up of alien genitals, or accommodation to male desire. She had far less confidence in the ability of other women to hew to their own nonconformist paths, perhaps not without reason.

Dworkin was an extremist because she kept harping on the nasty undercurrent of inequality in sexual relations between men and women, and she wouldn’t let it drop. In fact, she seemed to revel in it. More mild-mannered and non-feminist writers keep strumming this same banjo, too: namely, the notion that men, on the whole, get more out of sex than women do, and even when the women in question think they’re operating in some liberated fashion—turning the tables, having recreational sex just like the guys—they’re dupes and doing irreparable harm to themselves in the process. But for Dworkin, intercourse isn’t a private act or a personal folly; it’s a form of political occupation equal to any colonized people have endured. At least this line of analysis meant she refrained from dispensing advice on how to get more foreplay, or how to land a man by playing hard to get, or other quick fixes to female dilemmas. She didn’t believe in individual solutions, and she didn’t think a little freedom was enough: she wanted to overturn the whole system. This seems unlikely to happen anytime soon, but Dworkin is still a great philosopher of the bedroom, if a fumingly vitriolic one; even if you disagree with everything she says, she’s great exactly because her work resists all practicality. Intercourse is a furiously unreasonable book, and a usefully dangerous book for just that reason: it forces you to look at sex without trying to solve it.

The premise is startling and will always be radical: in short, that the act of sexual intercourse itself is what keeps women mired in a state of social inequality, because a “normal fuck” is an act of incursion. Perhaps a few female readers previously thought of sexual intercourse as a natural act; maybe they even thought they liked it—Dworkin will have none of this. Sex, along with the desire for it, is forced on women precisely to subordinate us. During intercourse, a man inhabits a woman, physically covering her and overwhelming her and at the same time penetrating her; and this physical relation to her—over her and inside her—is his possession of her. He has her, or, when he is done, he has had her. His thrusting into her is taken to be her capitulation to him as a conqueror; it is a physical surrender of herself to him; he occupies and rules her, expresses his elemental dominance over her, by his possession of her in the fuck.

Note the passive construction—“is taken to be”—which is a hallmark of the Dworkin style. Elsewhere: “The normal fuck by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation.” Taken ... by whom? The passive voice combined with the punch-you-in-the-face argument, the vacillation between victimization and militancy: this is Dworkin distilled to her essence.

Dworkin was a grandiose writer who liked playing with omniscience: she wanted to speak from within the dark tangled unconsciousness of sex itself, then expose it to the interrogator’s rubber hose. Not just expose it; she wanted to hold a war-crimes tribunal—Intercourse is her one-woman Nuremberg trial on the injustices of heterosexual sex. (Indeed, she was fond of comparing intercourse—along with its propaganda arm, pornography—to the great crimes of the twentieth century: Treblinka, Auschwitz, the Gulag, all come up as parallels.) Her favored prosecutorial tactic is to pick a revered literary author and ventriloquize him, reading him from inside out: at one moment she’s Tolstoy, at another Kobo Abe, then she takes a spin as Isaac Bashevis Singer. Characters merge into authors who merge into the singular truth of the entire culture; writers of every era and nationality are assembled to testify to the timeless truths of male hatred for women. You can read attentively and still not be entirely sure who’s speaking from one sentence to the next—Flaubert? Patriarchy? Dworkin? This is rhetorically powerful, if slippery, but don’t try to follow the logic; just revel in the dystopia. This is my life, she wants you to think. This is my world. Don’t get defensive—you might prove her right.

Given the slippery stylistics, Dworkin is a bit hard to pin down theoretically. It’s never entirely clear in her account what’s a cause and what’s an effect: whether women are an inferior class because intercourse subordinates us or intercourse subordinates us because we’re already an inferior class. But if the problem is the nature of the act itself, won’t this always be the case when it comes to heterosexual sex of the penetrative sort? Or is it just the nature of the act in a male-dominated society?

On this, as on much else, Dworkin is charmingly inconsistent. What’s nature, what’s culture? Why quibble over details? At certain points we hear that women are anatomically constructed for subordination—after all, we’re the ones with a hole that’s “synonymous with entry,” put there by the God who doesn’t exist (Dworkin is a virtuoso at the droll aside); at others, that male power constructs the meaning of intercourse, because men get off on dominance. But one way or another, the essence of fucking is domination, sex thus ensures female inferiority, and regardless of whether it was nature or culture that instituted the inequity, it’s doubtful it can ever be otherwise, at least not until everyone gives up fucking. (Dworkin is fairly indifferent to the reproductive aspects of the act, but then just how much sexual intercourse is really performed for reproduction anyway?) You find her paying occasional lip service to the possibility of a non-male-dominated society in which a more woman-oriented sexuality would hold sway, though this turns out to be the conventional soft-focus stuff: “diffuse and tender sensuality that involves the whole body and a polymorphous tenderness.” This, Dworkin assures, is what women really want. As far as bringing about the social conditions under which tender sensuality would achieve primacy in the bedroom, it’s difficult to see how this would happen, since men enjoy their dominance too much, and women are too complicit in helping them.
maintain it, especially by getting horizontal with them.

Obviously, Dworkin was not the world's biggest fan of men: not only are they titillated by inequality; they need it in order to perform at all. Men get pleasure from sexual hatred, and intercourse is their way of expressing contempt. Dworkin's own contempt for male sexuality runs just as deep, it should be noted: without rape, pornography, and prostitution, "the number of fucks would so significantly decrease that men might nearly be chaste." This is just one of her many indictments of the brawny sex. One may be tempted to argue that Dworkin underestimates—or perhaps never encountered—the vast range of male vulnerability possible in sex. Even the word "sex" suggests a reciprocity that doesn't figure in her argument. Her men are all into "cold fucking," either the duty-bound variety or the promiscuous kind "in which eventual abandonment turns the vagina into the wound Freud claimed it was." Just as all women want tender sensuality, all men want to degrade women.

Considering that Dworkin's writing was devoted to flattening men and women into reassuringly predictable types, it's interesting that one of her types, it's interesting that one of her models were Dante and Rimbaud, though the contemporary writer she brings to mind is Michel Houellebecq, at least thematically—her acid eloquence on the subject of empty sex matches his; her hatred of men matches his disdain for everyone—with people banging into one another in mutual incomprehension and loathing. For both, the contemporary mantra that sex is good for us is the emptiest notion of all, the new patriotism. Dworkin: "We talk about it all the time to say how much we like it—nearly as much, one might infer, as jogging." Ouch. "This is the sexuality of those who risk nothing because they have nothing inside to risk." Ouch again. Dworkin may have been the great hater of sex, but can she really be wrong when she charges that the chirpy "sex-positivity" of our time masks a deep and abiding core of disgust?

Dworkin's own writing teems with sexual disgust, but disgust transforms itself into a wellspring of language, into flurries of creative loathing and poetic incantations. Out of the vast number of women, self into a wellspring of language, poem and eroticizing "powerlessness and impotence" to what men like. Given the vast amount of time, energy, and disposable income so many heterosexual women do invest in achieving and maintaining whatever degree of sexual attractiveness is feasible—well, once again, it's hard to argue. Self-knowledge might be the means to really knowing a lover in sex—the only thing that might make passion personal instead of generic—but achieving self-knowledge is impossible for women to the extent that participating in intercourse in the first place requires eroticizing "powerlessness and self-annihilation." If the argument seems tautological, then you're getting the point: fucking is a vortex, an abyss, a sinkhole.

The topic that Dworkin is not entirely persuasive on is pleasure, which is pretty much absent, except as a form of false consciousness. She's obviously far more animated by violence, which becomes the template for all heterosexual sex. For a woman, trying to eke any pleasure from such experiences is collaborationism; initiating sex is taking the initiative in your own degradation. There's no entry for pleasure in the index, though you will find entries for "Sex act: repugnance toward" and "Sex act: used to express hatred." You must wait until page 158 to find orgasms mentioned in the text—or, more accurately, lack of orgasms, since Dworkin is citing Shere Hite's data to the effect that seven out of ten women don't experience orgasm from intercourse. Dworkin seems not unpleased. How could a woman have orgasms under such conditions, she

It's hard to argue. Any woman who won't admit it just enforces Dworkin's view that women lose any capacity for self-knowledge and honesty in sex, since to the extent that we reconcile ourselves to enjoying it under the current conditions, our brains turn to mush. In her account of female psychology, women transform themselves into sex scavengers, wanting sensuality and tenderness but settling instead for "being owned and being fucked" as a substitute for the physical affection and approval we crave from men. Women need male approval to be able to survive inside our own skins, and we solicit it through sex. To get sex we have to conform in "body type and behavior" to what men like. Given the vast amount of time, energy, and disposable income so many heterosexual women do invest in achieving and maintaining whatever degree of sexual attractiveness is feasible—well, once again, it's hard to argue. Self-knowledge might be the means to really knowing a lover in sex—the only thing that might make passion personal instead of generic—but achieving self-knowledge is impossible for women to the extent that participating in intercourse in the first place requires eroticizing "powerlessness and self-annihilation." If the argument seems tautological, then you're getting the point: fucking is a vortex, an abyss, a sinkhole.

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wants to know—conditions in which we have to turn ourselves into things because men can’t fuck equals? Who’d enjoy this kind of thing but colluders and dupes?

Yes, Dworkin reads like a stampeding dinosaur in our era of bubbly pro-sex post-feminism. Feminist anger isn’t exactly in fashion at the moment: these days women just direct their anger inward, or carp at individual men, typically their hapless husbands and boyfriends. Nevertheless, the theme that sex injures women continues to percolate through the culture in a well-meaning nibbled-to-death-by-ducks sort of way—that is, without the feminism and without Dworkin’s entertaining rhetorical grandiosity. Consider two recent, rather similar books: Laura Sessions Stepp’s Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both, and Wendy Shalit’s Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Claim Self-Respect and Find It’s Not Bad to Be Good. You learn pretty much everything you need to know from the subtitles, as each book has one point to make (and make and make): “hooking up” has replaced dating, and this harms young women (Stepp); the decline of sexual modesty is at the root of most social ills, and this harms young women (Shalit).

The bad news is that the young women of our nation are having too much sex; the good news is that at least they’re not enjoying it—though according to Stepp, they’re generally too bombed out of their gourds at the time to remember whether they did or not. Our younger generation are rampant hedonists, but it’s hedonism minus the pleasure.

If sexual experimentation ever had any meaning beyond a straight path to female heartbreak, if pleasure was once a political watchword and not only a synonym for self-destruction, Stepp and Shalit want to set the record straight on all that. In other words, both these books are shadow-boxing with the legacies of the 1960s and ’70s—sexual liberation and feminism—in the guise of instructions to the young. (Lesson One: Return to traditional values—or else.) Various forms of evidence are brought forward to plead their respective cases: Stepp trailed three groups of women around for a year—high schoolers from the Washington, D.C., area, and college students from Duke and George Washington universities. According to her findings, these girls mistakenly think they can have sex on their own terms, hooking up and walking away at will, and they regard this as empowering. Treating boys badly is especially empowering: great pleasure is taken in callously using boys just as boys have once in a while been known to use girls. The fact that her subjects report feeling in control and are often articulate high achievers matters little to Stepp, who argues variably that they don’t know what they feel, are doing themselves lasting injury, or should be pursuing serious relationships instead, because sex and commitment should be aligned. (There are a lot of “shoulds” floating around, which reminds me of an old art school teacher of mine who used to say, “Shouldhood is shithood.”) But the girls Stepp interviews hardly seem capable of committed relationships: they’re immature and self-involved; when they do acquire boyfriends, they invariably break up with them over trivialities. Stepp wants her subjects to have the advanced self-knowledge and settled values of a middle-aged journalist, which seems like a bad case of overidentification.

Shalit agrees with most of this, but she has bigger game in her sights, primarily the sexual oversaturation of modern society. Since sex is indeed everywhere, her approach is necessarily scattered. She calls up a leader of NOW on the phone and tries to get her to indict Girls Gone Wild; she interviews college girls leading chastity campaigns; she goes undercover at a “Cuddle Party,” where participants pay up to $1,000 to put on pajamas and, well, cuddle (nonsexually, though Shalit has her suspicions); and she offers myriad other examples of modern life gone wrong, from blogging, to immodest camera angles on What Not to Wear (a wardrobe-makeover program), to sex education, to college girls wearing pajamas to class, all thrown into a chunky stew of an argument. (One of my own books is also held up briefly to make the case that immorality runs rampant in our society.)

Neither Stepp nor Shalit wants to come off as anti-sex precisely; both are at pains to stress that they’re not prudes and that they like sex, or do under the right circumstances. Both writers presume their own marriages are the models that members of the younger generation should be aspiring to but will never attain if they’re sluttting around. (Shalit and her husband followed Orthodox Jewish law and didn’t touch each other until after the ceremony.) Both authors worry that casual sex loses its power and mystery, gets boring. In her day, Dworkin was less persuaded that marriage was the answer to women’s problems, given “the crushing reality of male sexual dominance: the fucking, the boredom, the abandonment.” Stepp and Shalit seem to think sexual boredom affects only those having casual sex—but hey, what about boring married sex? (To be fair, Stepp emphasizes love and commitment more than marriage per se.) Both think men should have to work harder for sex, that it’s the woman’s task to train men to act better than they do, and that with so many women hooking up, things aren’t fair for those who won’t. Not hooking up these days sounds like trying to unionize in a right-to-work state—if everyone else is selling it cheaper, how’s a higher-priced girl going to stay in the market?

This is all depressingly familiar. So is the litany of harms we’re told derive from casual sex. Stepp and Shalit do know how to thump that fear card: between the two of them, they manage to haul in anorexia, depression, suicide, self-cutting, an empty life of careerism and singlehood, STDs (of course), along with rapists and serial killers handpicking their victims from the photos of girls in revealing outfits on MySpace (that one is Shalit’s). Monocausal arguments (casual sex causes X) shade into hysterical ones (the bogeymen will get you). The question I find interesting is why it’s invariably sex that produces these hysterical arguments about risk, while other social risks get a pass. Most of us would agree that auto fatalities are tied to driving in cars, that driving carries risks, but no one—at least in secular society—is proposing that women stop driving. Maybe it’s an unanswerable
question: Freud started out by trying to decipher the mysteries of female hysteria and ended up churning out twenty-four volumes. Hysteria is a dybbuk, hopping from one generation to the next in slightly altered guises, eluding the bondage of reason. Dworkin, too, had her female fears, though at least she wasn't peddling the story that everything used to be better in the old days. All in all, if I had to cast my vote for a sexual alarmist, I'm for Dworkin, the radical firebrand, in lieu of the well-meaning aunties. The new alarmism is so tepid compared with the old alarmism. Dworkin found sex tragic and disgusting, but she wasn't trying to spawn a generation of nice girls—though she also had no time for sexual experimentation, and she disliked men (along with sex) too much to concede that nice girls stilled by conventionality and greed for freedom have always pursued it by trying to act like men, whether that means careers, adventurism (from Joan of Arc to Amelia Earhart), or sleeping around. Emulating men has its problems, to be sure. Men haven't got it all figured out either—other than how not to buy books telling them to have less sex, which may be why no one writes them. For my money, this in itself would be a condition for women to aspire to. There are as many ways to assess the differences between the sexes as there are uses to which such accounts are put. Take the version that says sex hurts women more than men. For Dworkin the propensity for injury begins with the female anatomy: "Women are unspeakably vulnerable in intercourse because of the nature of the act—entry, penetration, occupation." Obviously, Stepp and Shalit cannot follow Dworkin down this particular path. They're equally invested in female fragility, but indicting intercourse itself would implicate marital sex, and marital sex is supposed to be the reward for virtue in their version of the story. Additionally, Dworkin held that the solution to female fragility was feminism. This, too, is unacceptable. For Stepp and Shalit, feminism was the problem: it was feminists who persuaded women to sleep around. (They seem not to have heard about Andreea Dworkin: well-known feminist, not exactly a sex liberter.) But if feminism is the problem, obviously some other solution is required, and the solution is—drumroll, please—men: finding a man to love and marry you. This is presented as a new idea. Since men are the solution instead of the problem, a new culprit is required. It turns out that the blame for bad sex goes to—another drumroll, please—mothers. I find this refreshing. If you ask me, it's been far too long since moms were in the dock. Remember when they caused homosexual sons and autism? Now they cause promiscuity. At least feminist moms do, according to both Stepp and Shalit—bad mothers carting around antiquated ideas about liberation, compelling their daughters into meaningless sex with assorted men. For Stepp, it's mothers who force their daughters into becoming relationship-averse overachievers with the wrong priorities, valuing careers over love, all to fulfill Mom's own thwarted ambitions. But it's Shalit who really delivers a spanking to Mom, particularly the boomer moms, who learned moral irresponsibility in the 1960s and now are trying to foist it on their daughters. Mothers are the ultimate sleaze queens in Shalit's reportage: they photograph their baby daughters in bikinis, splayed on car hoods like porn stars; they set their teenage daughters up on assignations with older men when they judge it's time for daughter to lose her virginity. (No doubt right-wing talk show hosts will lap it up: America's moms finally exposed as the slimy predators we always knew they were.) Luckily the daughters are smarter than these louche boomer parents. They're rebelling, embracing virginity, demanding to wear one-piece swimsuits. Shalit says there's a grassroots modesty campaign under way; she herself was in its forefront. Yes, she's the real rebel, not those has-been bad girls, closet conformists all. Punctuating the distracting tales of other people are numerous episodes recounting Shalit's own difficult journey as modesty's spokesmodel, forever under attack for her outre views, discriminated against in college for protesting co-ed bathrooms, now continually dissed in the media by boomers publishing digs at her expense (various examples are reprinted here—if you review her negatively, you can expect a mention in her next book). People she wants to interview won't return her calls; feminists refuse to answer her questions. She's the villain! In college, the transgendered kids had a support group, but where was the support group for the chaste? Shalit is fond of painting herself as an embattled heroine—an exhaustingly plucky one—though how embarrassed can she be when her views are the official views of the current administration? Sex has a way of becoming a complicated story. At least we like generating such stories about it, stories that in turn condition what it feels like and how we experience it. It may be a private act, but it's a social act too: the ways we fuck are historically contingent. For Dworkin that's the problem: she thinks the reasons women want intercourse are foul, "filled with the spiteful but carefully hidden malice of the powerless." Stepp and Shalit would agree that women are often deluded in their reasons for wanting sex. But is this a peculiarly female trait, or merely a human trait? People want to and frequently do have sex with each other for murky and self-deceiving reasons, or for clear-eyed reasons that turn out to be mistaken, or a thousand variations on the theme of erroneous judgment. If young women are experimenting with roles, trying to invert nontraditional relations to their sexuality, the question is why this causes so much hand-wringing. One obvious reason is that they're breaking ranks with the injury story, which alarms those who are invested in conventional femininity. But female sexuality has always generated alarmist narratives—long before feminism, or the sexual revolution, there was something scandalous and dirty about it. Also endlessly fascinating, hence the taboos, the purity rites, the pornography industry... It's the problem that generates the succession of solutions that somehow never solve anything. But if it were solved, how distressing that would be: no alarms to raise, advice to dispense, or skirts to peek under.