

Against Gyno-pessimism

A response to Liza Featherstone

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I love Liza Featherstone's essay, "[Moving Beyond Misogyny](#)" (*The New Republic*, November 4 2019), an essay that highlights the current popularity of misogyny as liberal feminism's basic category for analyzing social problems. Hatred of women is offered up as the explanation for everything from domestic violence, campus rape, and sexual harassment, to Hillary Clinton's failure to win the presidency in 2016. Women are kept down, abused, and murdered because men hate them. It's as simple as that.

But it's not just that hate doesn't explain everything – it doesn't explain anything.

Offered up in the context of a social or political analysis, misogyny is the attribution of a feeling that covers over the absence of an explanation. An event or phenomenon is positioned as the effect of an aversion that is attributed to a group. The group is constituted as a group by virtue of the attribute and the attribute is treated as a cause – empirical evidence be damned. For example, violence against women is explained as evidence of misogyny. But according to the most recent federal statistics, except for rape, [more men than women are likely to be victims of violent crime](#). To complicate matters further, [men are more likely to be victims of offenses committed by men than women are, and women are more likely to commit offenses against women than they are against men](#). If misogyny accounts for violence against women, does misandry account for violence against men? Or are these categories too crude to tell us much at all?

Misogyny's analytical weakness does not diminish its contemporary popularity. It might even increase it. In the affective networks of communicative capitalism, outrage circulates more easily than critical analysis. Moralism substitutes for explanation, and moral outrage doesn't require reading anything too long. We know how to trigger each other enough to like and share and deploy the appropriate GIF.

The outrage of the hated can produce a momentary sense of unity. Being hated inspires ferocity, self-righteousness, cancel culture: "I'm unfriending anyone who thinks violence against women is okay." So rather than telling us something about the haters, misogyny is an inverted or reactive social diagnosis for creating an identity among the hated. After all, haters gonna hate (and even Taylor Swift advises us to shake it off).

But what are women supposed to do about being hated? The options that the misogyny diagnosis presents repeat the traps of fairytales: be the witch who draws power from her outcast position or the passive princess dreaming of love. Poison men or win them over. Mirroring the compressed possibilities of the world it claims to critique, the misogyny diagnosis compels us to accept a world of false choices. In so doing, it avoids the perplexing dilemma of how women are to wage a struggle against an aversion by side-stepping politics altogether.

In fact, the point seems to be that we can't do anything about being hated. Misogyny supplies an account of the world well-suited for the circulation of rage as a commodity. One gets a bit of a charge, a flash of indignation, while remaining free of any obligation to act. The situation women face is moral, perhaps even ontological. Political struggle can't improve women's lives when the deepest problem we face is misogyny. No wonder liberal feminists find misogyny a compelling lens for understanding the contemporary world. It reflects it back to them while getting them off the hook for failing to fight to change it.

Featherstone astutely draws out the core problem with the misogyny lens: it "forecloses big dreams of political change." Not only does virtue signaling substitute for politics, but mirroring the dominant order conserves that order. Margaret Thatcher — no one's feminist icon despite having broken the political glass ceiling in the UK — told us that there is no alternative to capitalism. Liberal feminists tell us there is no alternative to misogyny. Their argument takes a form familiar in the academic humanities as Afro-pessimism, the hatred of the black theorized as the root of European modernity. Corey Robin [identifies the same logic in the jurisprudence of Clarence Thomas](#): racism is ineradicable. And we are seeing a similar eco-pessimism in writers such as Roy Scranton and Jonathan Franzen. The climate catastrophe is here and hoping that we might enact changes big enough to ward off the worst is as delusional as it is dangerous. Public funds have to be saved for disaster relief. Critical energies should be directed to learning how to die.

Gyno-pessimism is another iteration of the same story. By diagnosing the primary political problem as an attitude, an aversion that persists transhistorically and transculturally, the liberal feminist assumes the inadequacy of politics from the start. Material struggles over the division of labor, property, and the wage are neglected and the capitalist system taken for granted as the basic economic condition of our lives. The lens of misogyny prevents us from seeing the broad history of women's political movement. It can't focus on women's leadership in anti-slavery, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist struggles, or on their victories. It fails to place contemporary defeats in the historical context of the defeat of unions, labor, the Soviet experiment, and the communist dream of an emancipatory egalitarian society characterized by solidarity and comradeship.

The array of contemporary pessimisms affirm Francis Fukuyama's notorious ["end of history" thesis](#). Fukuyama announced that the defeat of state socialism meant the final victory of liberalism. The new cultural pessimisms mark the ideological form of this victory in their proclamation of the end, or pointlessness, of political struggle. Absent the political opening, all that is left is ethics and economics (to use Carl Schmitt's characterization of liberalism). For the pessimists this means dealing with hatred in the context of unquestioned capitalism.

In her essay, Featherstone returns to second wave feminism as the place from which we might re-evaluate the present. She does so because, unlike the gyno-pessimists, second wave feminists believed another world is possible if we fight for it. Recognizing that the struggle against bigotry in all its forms depends on abolishing the capitalist system, their goal was nothing less than women's liberation.

That must be our goal, too.

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