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The Patriarchal Stranglehold

- Reviews section -

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**“From each, says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs.”
â€”Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale***

Kate Manne’s first book is an ambitious work of analytic feminist and moral philosophy. Drawing examples from contemporary politics, classic literature, and sociology and psychology research, her writing also has an engaging, journalistic quality.

Prominently featured in her analysis are the 2014 Isla Vista murders by Elliot Rodger, rape cases garnering national attention perpetrated by rapist/Stanford swimmer Brock Turner and serial rapist-of-Black-women/cop Daniel Holtzclaw, misogynistic attacks on public figures and politicians like Hillary Clinton, as well as the behaviors of our misogynist-and-racist-in-chief Donald Trump. Although unfortunately containing some of the standard pitfalls of the liberal political framework that perpetuate an impoverished view of feminism, as I will address later, this work deserves serious engagement from radical leftists.

In exploring the logic of misogyny, Manne embarks on an explicitly political, value-laden project. She aims to establish what she calls an “ameliorative conception” (33) of “misogyny” in the context of guiding questions such as: What kind of term ought we have at our disposal to identify and understand women’s pervasive experiences as the targets of hostility and abuse? What kind of definition of “misogyny” is *politically useful* to aid us in combating patriarchal forces, in addition to other forms of overlapping oppression?

Manne contrasts her ameliorative approach with what she calls the “naïve conception” (32) of misogyny (commonly thought of as the dictionary definition), the latter of which looks something like “the hatred of women.” While revealing the divide between the term(s) we have and the term we need, Manne acknowledges that her proposed definition “will only be revisionary for some language users and not others.” (81)

In fact, she dubs her ameliorative definition of misogyny the “feminist conception” (33), reflecting the fact that feminist academics, journalists and activists have been using “misogyny” in this way for decades in their own attempts to understand widespread behavioral patterns and cultural attitudes rooted in patriarchal oppression. As such, Manne’s project is also an attempt to popularize and unify various threads of an already existing political project.

Misogyny Enforces Patriarchy

What then is the “feminist conception” of misogyny? For Manne, misogyny is best understood as the law enforcement branch of the patriarchy. (78) It polices and enforces patriarchal social relations by differentiating between “good women” and “bad women.” It punishes the latter for their violations â€” and who is subject to punishment may change at a moment’s notice depending on what the patriarchy requires from a particular woman at a given time.

She is supposed to meet his/the system’s needs and expectations, whatever they may be, whenever they may be. To adhere to the patriarchy is a moving target that no one can hit, at least not consistently.

What then happens when you inadvertently miss or actively rebel? You encounter misogynistic hostility that may take the form of insults, slander, physical violence, etc. It’s the classic “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t” story of

women's oppression.

Either she's a slut, or she's a prude. She's an outspoken bitch, or she's a tentative mouse in the corner. She's an arrogant snob, or she's an airhead. And so on, with the common thread being that she isn't meeting his/the system's expectations.

In many instances, a few representative women serve as public examples of "particular kinds of woman" (author's emphasis, 33) with whom other women should avoid associating or themselves being, lest they become targets of misogyny as well. Think of Trump's "nasty women," which in this case many women have turned on its head by wearing the insult as a badge of honor during a time of heightening opposition to such overtly misogynistic and racist characterizations by the man who became U.S. president.

In formulating her theoretical framework, Manne also draws a clear distinction between sexism and misogyny, terms that are often used inconsistently and at times interchangeably in public discourse.

For her, sexism is the ideological branch of the patriarchal system. (79) As such, it provides the ostensibly scientific justification for differentiating between men and women with regard to abilities, proclivities, and resultant "natural" roles in social life (e.g. women bear the primary burden of caregiving labor in society because they are naturally predisposed to it).

Sexism *justifies* patriarchal oppression, while misogyny enforces that oppression. Additionally, though sexism and misogyny commonly work in tandem, Manne argues that they may operate independently, particularly in political contexts where some gains have been made in combating overtly sexist ideology but misogynist enforcement of gender norms remains. This analysis seems essentially correct to me.

Dominant "Takers"

In one of her meatiest chapters, Manne casts doubt on the ubiquitous language of dehumanization in political discourse, which she views as incorrect and ineffective. We've all heard oppressed groups' demands for recognition of our common humanity: "See that we are human too, so that you may stop with the violence, the cruelty, the objectification."

But Manne is rightly skeptical of this approach. As she argues, the problems of gender oppression are often not a failure to recognize the Other's humanity, but a belief that the Other is a *human giver* to whose social goods and services the dominant group is entitled.

When women, designated as human givers, withhold emotional and other forms of labor from men (generally speaking), men react reflexively on a *moral feeling of injustice* that results from being deprived of that to which they have been socialized to assume they are rightfully owed.

In this way, the "failed" human giver becomes the enemy and provokes the misogynistic hostility arising from aggrieved entitlement.

In part on the grounds of this argument, Manne later calls on us to "accept the *banality of misogyny*" (211) because such hostile reactions and their consequences are best understood through a structural, political story rather than a

personal, psychological story. Misogyny is often not about one's individual motives related to a deep-seated hatred of women; it is about what one is told he is owed and what happens when he doesn't get it. From here, we move to attempting to understand misogyny through *its systemic effects on women*, rather than its seeming origination within individual actors.

Having established this theoretical foundation, Manne spends much of the book exploring how misogyny operates in the following manifestations of women's oppression among others: choking and strangulation, killing the whole family, and gendered expressions of shame; rape and sexual harassment; testimonial injustice with regard to undermining women's credibility and competence in legal and other matters; victim-blaming and "himpathy" regarding the tendency to sympathize with the downfall of the "golden boy" (197) who "has so much to lose;" and the propagation of misogynistic policies that limit access to reproductive services like contraception and abortion.

Hillary Clinton as Target?

Generally, Manne's analysis is illuminating and convincing. However, a glaring weakness of Down Girl is Manne's overzealous application of this framework to the recent U.S. presidential election. While certainly containing some truth, Manne's use of Hillary Clinton as a case study target of misogynistic hostility obfuscates more than it elucidates.

Giving insufficient consideration to other political factors that contribute to hostility toward Clinton, Manne effectively lends too much explanatory power to misogyny's role in the election results. She does not explicitly claim that misogyny cost Clinton the election, but her commentary strongly suggests it.

Without a doubt, Clinton has been subject to misogynistic hostility throughout her political career that played an *unquantifiable* role in the election (e.g. complaints that her voice is "shrill," that she's "cold" and "smug," that she "meddled," or "overstepped" her "proper role," during her husband's presidency, etc.).

And yes, misogyny is likely present in criticisms of Clinton from some people of all political leanings because, accepting Manne's own framework of "the banality of misogyny," it is a socialized evil to which no one is immune. That this is the case seems hardly controversial.

While Manne works to account for the myriad ways in which Clinton may be viewed as a "bad woman" violating patriarchal social relations by attempting to enter the "boys' club," what she fails to acknowledge is that Clinton's campaign followed in the wake of the Occupy, immigrant rights, and Black Lives Matter movements, all of which led to growing suspicion of ruling class politicians and their support for austerity, privatization and the use of state violence to silence dissent and prioritize capital's profits over the needs of the people.

On this point, it is also interesting to note that Manne frequently mentions privileged (sometimes rich) white men in her analyses, but never names capitalism as a key exploitive system behind that power. In one crucial sense, to the extent that the "boys' club" is intertwined with the "powerful people club," Clinton has been a long-time member, not a rogue woman attempting to infiltrate it. All this seems lost on Manne.

Regarding left criticism of Clinton, Manne remarks, "Many on the left vehemently insisted they were not biased against Clinton. But they were nevertheless convinced she was corrupt, conniving, greedy, entitled and callous." (104)

Manne is correct that Clinton experienced significant hostility from people to her left throughout the 2016 campaign. Indeed, many to the left of Clinton do feel a special kind of hostility toward her (as well as Barack Obama), not because she is woman-as-enemy by virtue of her status as a powerful woman in a patriarchal system, but because she represents a class enemy through her support for racist, misogynistic, and imperialistic policies and institutions that maintain the oppression and exploitation of millions of people around the world, while simultaneously employing rhetoric and imagery to create the impression that she fights against these oppressive and exploitive systems. If that's not a hypocrite and liar, I don't know what is.

Thus, left critics' principled hostility toward Clinton is far from a post hoc attempt to rationalize their underlying misogyny (a common claim Manne makes throughout her text to dismiss criticism of Clinton). For an excellent account of Clinton's crimes against the people, see Kevin Young and Diana C. Sierra Becerra's March 2015 *Against the Current* article, "Hillary Clinton and Corporate Feminism." [\[1\]](#)

In a blatant misapplication of research showing that college students are more likely to describe women professors as "fake," to advance her Clinton apology Manne asserts, "This hypothesis could help to explain why Bernie Sanders was preferred by many millennials to Hillary Clinton by such a large margin, in no small part due to differential perceptions of their integrity, sincerity, and authenticity, and seemingly in excess of the political and moral differences between the two of them" especially after it was clear that the insinuations about Clinton's dishonesty and untrustworthiness came to essentially nothing." (275)

Besides the fact that she tellingly minimizes voters' ability to discern the substantive political difference between these two candidates, she also conveniently overlooked recent data [\[2\]](#) revealing that millennials on average are much more likely to identify with socialist politics than other age demographics. Assuming she is aware of such research, she appears to avoid mentioning anything that may complicate her narrative. Similar stretches and omissions can be found elsewhere in the text.

Although Manne genuinely tries to capture ways in which gender bias may have affected the 2016 presidential election, she ultimately provides us with a tone-deaf analysis of the particular political moment; unsupported speculations about the mindsets of vast swathes of the voting public (as well as a lack of consideration for the millions of people who abstain from the process altogether); an inability to see the successes of the Sanders campaign as anything other than Democratic business as usual; and a seeming obliviousness to the existence and impact of social movements and radical politics operating outside the two capitalist parties.

Need for Strategy

Toward the end of her book, Manne affirms the need for both structural reforms and changes in hearts and minds. But she has little to say in the way of envisioning strategies for fighting patriarchal oppression.

Her most concrete proposal is to promote the power that women, by speaking up about abuses, have to "foster solidarity" (238) with one another and to shift the public discourse by "wrestl[ing] away the moral narrative" (223) in which men's behaviors have been all too easily exonerated and women's claims all too easily dismissed or actively discredited.

Such a sentiment is particularly germane in light of the explosion of the #MeToo movement in recent months. Indeed, speaking out in massive numbers against sexual abuse and harassment has at least temporarily given women greater power, credibility and sense of community.

The Patriarchal Stranglehold

Down Girl is a book centered around ameliorative definitions and their application to our experiences as political beings; yet perhaps its greatest irony is the fact that Manne does not provide us with a definition of feminism. Without this, readers are left with the unstated default of liberal feminism.

Thankfully, Manne's political orientation is not central to most of her framework and analysis; these assumptions simply lurk implicitly in the background, at times beside-the-point and at others serving to weaken her arguments by ridding them of nuance, as is the case in her discussion of Clinton.

Thus, some of Manne's featured cases will likely offer moments of "not-this-again" frustration, while others will offer moments of genuine insight. For those feeling their blood pressure rising at just the thought of encountering more apologist support for Clinton, I suggest to breathe and push through it. There is still much in Down Girl worth serious consideration.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] <https://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4390>.

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/rampage/wp/2016/02/05/millennials-have-a-higher-opinion-of-socialism-than-of-capitalism/?utm_term=.30976bdb6b7a.