

Why I Am Not a Feminist

A Feminist Manifesto

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Introduction

Are you a feminist?

Do you believe women are human beings and deserve to be treated as such? That women deserve all the same rights and liberties bestowed upon men? If so, then you are a feminist, or so all the feminists keep insisting.

Despite the simplicity and obviousness of the dictionary definition of feminism, and despite years of working at feminist non-profits and decades of advocacy, I am disowning the label. If you asked me today if I am a feminist I would not only say no, I would say no with a sneer.

Don't worry—this is not where I insist I am not a feminist because I am afraid of being mistaken for one of those hairy-legged, angry, man-hating feminists that are drawn up like bogeymen by

men and women alike. Nor will I now reassure you of my approachability, my reasonable nature, my heteronormativity, my love of men and my sexual availability—despite the fact that this disclaimer appears to be a prerequisite for all feminist writing published in the last fifteen years.

If anything, that pose—I am harmless, I am toothless, you can fuck me—is why I find myself rejecting the feminist label: All these bad feminists, all these Talmudic “can you be a feminist and still have a bikini wax?” discussions. All these reassurances to their (male) audiences that they don’t want too much, won’t go too far—“We don’t know what Andrea Dworkin was on about either! Trust us.” All these feminists giving blow-jobs like it’s missionary work.

Somewhere along the way toward female liberation, it was decided that the most effective method was for feminism to become universal. But instead of shaping a world and a philosophy that would become attractive to the masses, a world based on fairness and community and exchange, it was feminism itself that would have to be rebranded and remarketed for contemporary men and women.

They forgot that for something to be universally accepted, it must become as banal, as non-threatening and ineffective as possible.

Hence the pose. People don’t like change, and so feminism must be as close to the status quo—with minor modifications—in order to recruit large numbers.

In other words, it has to become entirely pointless.

Radical change is scary. It’s terrifying, actually. And the feminism I support is a full-on revolution. Where women are not simply *allowed* to participate in the world as it already exists—an inherently corrupt world, designed by a patriarchy to subjugate and control and destroy all challengers—but are actively able to re-shape it. Where women do not simply knock on the doors of churches, of governments, of capitalist marketplaces and politely ask for admittance, but create their own religious systems, governments, and economies. My feminism is not one of incremental change, revealed in the end to be *The Same As Ever, But More So*. It is a cleansing fire.

Asking for a system that was built for the express purpose of oppression to “um, please stop oppressing me?” is nonsense work. The only task worth doing is fully dismantling and replacing that system.

This is why I cannot associate myself with a feminism that focuses dementedly on “self-empowerment,” whose goals include not the full

destruction of corporate culture but merely a higher percentage of female CEOs and military officers, a feminism that requires no thought, no discomfort, and no real change.

If feminism is universal, if it is something that all women and men can "get on board" with, then it is not for me.

If feminism is nothing more than personal gain disguised as political progress, then it is not for me.

If by declaring myself a feminist I must reassure you that I am not angry, that I pose no threat, then feminism is definitely not for me.

I am angry. And I do pose a threat.

Feminism is:

- a narcissistic reflexive thought process: I define myself as feminist, so everything I do is a feminist act, no matter how banal or regressive—i.e., no matter what I do, I am a hero.
- a fight to allow women to participate equally in the oppression of the powerless and the poor
- a method of shaming and silencing anyone who disagrees with you, inspired by a naive belief that disagreement or conflict is abuse
- a protective system utilizing trigger warnings, politically correct language, mob rule, and straw man arguments to prevent a person from ever feeling uncomfortable or challenged
- an attack dog posing as a kitten with a droplet of fresh milk on her nose
- a decade-long conversation about which television show is a good television show and which television show is a bad television show
- a bland, reworked brand of soda, focus group tested for universal palatability and inoffensiveness, scientifically proven to leach calcium from your bones, with an

enormous marketing budget; tagline: "Go ahead, be a monster. You deserve it."

- aspiration. Those below you may be pitiable, but not really your concern. Those above you are models of behavior for attaining the best life. The best life is defined as a life of wealth, comfort, and firm buttocks.
- all about you.

For these reasons and more, *I am not a feminist.*

Why I Am Not a Feminist

1

The Problem with Universal Feminism

Every woman should be a feminist." You hear this a lot now, online, in magazines, in conversation. And the thing is, these advocates of universal feminism insist, you probably already are! If you believe women should receive equal pay for equal work and have the right to make their own medical and family planning decisions, then you actually already are a feminist and you should "reclaim" the word.

The idea of universal feminism has entered popular culture like never before, after decades of female celebrities trying to distance themselves from the label so as not to appear unfriendly and unmarketable. The tide has turned. What was unfashionable has now become very fashionable. What was unmarketable is now a marketing strategy. Celebrities, musicians, actresses

all proudly proclaim the word. It's in our fashion magazines, it's on our television shows, it's in our music. Feminism is trending.

So we know that we should all be calling ourselves feminists now. What's less clear is what exactly that accomplishes. Or even what, once we do reclaim the label, using the word, buying the appropriate t-shirts (like the \$220 scarf from Acne Studios that reads "RADICAL FEMINIST," or maybe the \$650 sweater that says the same) and wearing them proudly in public, what exactly are we supposed to do then? And who, dare I ask, are we supposed to be taking the word back *from*?

Is it men who ruined the word for us? They spent a lot of time twisting the word around into an insult, creating panics about feminazi witches causing the downfall of society and conjuring up hurricanes and earthquakes from God's wrath. No, it turns out having a right-wing preacher fling the word at you, trying to make you feel ashamed, just makes you prouder to accept it.

Instead, today women are asking women to reclaim the word *feminist* from other women. Today's feminists accuse the actual feminists of ruining the movement's good name and putting other women off from joining the cause.

Feminism was always a fringe culture, a small group of activists and radicals and weirdos who

forced society to move toward them. It was not an overwhelming majority of women who became suffragettes, chaining themselves to fences, going on hunger strikes, breaking windows and throwing bombs. The overwhelming majority of women either didn't care or wished the others would stop making such a fuss. It wasn't an overwhelming majority of women who created a public life for women, organizing women-owned banks and businesses, creating a network of safe (though still illegal) abortion providers, fighting for women's spaces in educational systems, and writing radical texts and manifestos. The overwhelming majority of women during the second wave just wanted a comfortable (married) life with a little more independence.

It was always a small number of radical, heavily invested women who did the hard work of dragging women's position forward, usually through shocking acts and words. The majority of women benefited from the work of these few, while often trying to disassociate themselves from them.

But now there is a different dynamic between the radicals and the mainstream. Now the mainstream wants to claim the radical space for itself while simultaneously denying the work the radicals do. I hear the word *feminazi* coming from young feminists' mouths today way more

often than I have ever heard it coming from the mouths of right-wing men. And they're using it in a similar way, to shame and disassociate themselves from the activists and revolutionaries. The most prominent feminist writers right now have twisted themselves in knots trying to distance themselves from their predecessors, willfully misrepresenting the work of women like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon and denying any association therewith. Dworkin's "weaponised shame," Laurie Penny wrote in a column at *New Statesman* without explaining how she has come to sum up Dworkin's belief system as such, "has no place in any feminism I subscribe to."

In order to make feminism palatable to everyone, they have to make sure no one is made uncomfortable by feminism's goals; so the women who advocated for radical societal change are out. Making people uncomfortable was feminism's whole point. In order for a person, or society, to make drastic changes, there has to be a mental or emotional cataclysm. One has to feel, strongly, the need for change before change will willingly be made. And a feminism where everyone is comfortable is a feminism where everyone is working for their own self-interest, rather than the interest of the whole. So, while feminism has

become fashionable, the actual feminist work of creating a more equal society is as unfashionable as it has ever been.

Making feminism a universal pursuit might look like a good thing—or at the very least a neutral thing—but in truth it progresses, and I think accelerates, a process that has been detrimental to the feminist movement: the shift of focus from society to the individual. What was once collective action and a shared vision for how women might work and live in the world has become identity politics, a focus on individual history and achievement, and an unwillingness to share space with people with different opinions, worldviews, and histories. It has separated us out into smaller and smaller groups until we are left all by ourselves, with our concern and our energy directed inward instead of outward.

You might wonder, as you read your way through contemporary feminist literature: Why the emphasis on claiming the label? If a woman believes that she is deserving of equal pay for equal work, if she is pro-choice and votes accordingly, why should we care at all whether or not she self-identifies as a feminist?

There are legitimate reasons why a woman, even a woman who believes strongly in equality, would be reluctant to don the identity of feminist. Feminism has had its bleak moments—from the blind racism of some of its leaders, to feminists' siding with Christian leaders in its anti-pornography campaign—and some women understandably have difficulty reconciling these failures with the value of the movement as a whole.

But instead of listening to why you are perhaps reluctant to adopt the identity of feminist, universal feminists, in their efforts to convert, will tell you what your reasons are. You must think, they insist, that all feminists are lesbians, don't shave their legs, hate men, and refuse to become wives or mothers. You must think that in order to be a feminist you have to shave your head, make arts and crafts with your menstrual blood, and listen to folk music. They think the reason you have shied away from feminism is because of feminism's image problem, and the source of this image problem is the radical feminists of the second wave.

If the goal is universality, then these feminists need to simplify the message to such a degree that the only people who would disagree with their pitch are religious freaks and hardcore misogynists. They don't seem to realize that this

simplification of feminism into something soft and Disneyfied is one reason women turn away.

And look, I get it, all you feminist missionaries. It is disappointing to find ourselves where we are. We are more than a hundred years into this revolution and it's not just that the world remains resistant to women being in it (and it is). Women still face disproportionate amounts of discrimination and violence, and they somehow carry both the burden and the blame for that. If you get raped, it's probably your fault. If you find yourself in an abusive relationship, it's probably your fault. If you get passed up for promotion while male colleagues advance again and again, it's probably your fault. And it's not just that sexual assault rates remain high and prosecutorial success rates remain low, or that what society still values most about women are who they mothered and who they married rather than what they actually contributed to the world.

It is also that so many women themselves are resistant to embracing their own liberation, and in so being, seem to frustrate our own plans for progress.

Some women do refuse to call themselves feminist because the word is alienating to men. Women are still choosing to opt out of work and stay at home to raise children, and women are

still taking pole-dancing classes, saying it is good exercise. Women are still painfully removing all of the hair from their bodies and pretending to be morons so as not to threaten their male suitors. They are still giving their money and attention to musicians who tell them they are worthless pieces of ass, now open your mouth bitch and take my dick. Women are still watching blockbuster films and aspiring to be the supportive wife or the sexy girlfriend who needs rescuing, rather than the one (man) saving the world. Women in Hollywood are still producing films where men save the world. They still love and support and marry wife-beaters, rapists, and misogynistic trolls. Women are still voting Republican.

What to do about our reluctant sisters? Many feminists think the answer is converting them to the feminist cause. And the first (and often last in the new age of shallow feminism) step in that conversion is accepting the label and identity. Rather than, you know, showing them that the world and their role in it is fucked.

First, we should acknowledge *why* it is important that women identify as feminist. I mean, important to feminists, not to the world. This has nothing to do with how women choose to live their lives or conduct themselves at work or with their families and communities. With fem-

inism's new focus on labels and identity, rather than on the philosophical and political content of the movement, what becomes most important are the things on the surface. Like using the right words, rather than the wrong words. (The fact that the right words keep changing does nothing to quell the anger that builds in Internet Feminism if you use the wrong words.) This is what happens when simply calling yourself a feminist can suddenly be counted as a radical act.

You see this regularly on feminist blogs and pseudo-feminist-friendly sites like *BuzzFeed*: lists of famous women who refuse to call themselves feminists. These women are listed periodically so that good feminists, properly labeled and identified, can ruefully shake their heads about the other women's ignorance. In the comments, feminists will—instead of reading each woman's reasoning for refusing the label, or understanding the different cultural contexts that older or international women might be coming from—use this public shaming to feel better about their own correct way of thinking and speaking and labeling. *Bust* magazine, back when it was a more outwardly feminist publication, used to ask each of their female interview subjects whether or not they identified as feminist. In 2005, the musician Björk said no, and that interview is still

used in these online lists as of this year. Björk is a female artist often credited with being one of the most innovative and daring musicians of her generation, regardless of gender. She has collaborated with and supported women musicians, fashion designers, video directors. She has spoken frankly and openly in interviews about the difficulties of being a woman in a male-dominated industry. She has proven herself to be an exemplary human being and creator, and she is a tremendous role model for young aspiring musicians. If we understand that the problem feminists have with Björk has nothing to do with her actions and is only about her language and way of identifying herself, then we can recognize that this is about a feminist marketing campaign and not a philosophy.

Compare her to the shiny pop stars who have discovered the market for feminist girl power and who use the word loudly while displaying regressive ideas, images, and messages. The word *feminist* acts as a shield from criticism, and many of these women are celebrated as heroes. If you use the proper word, then all is forgiven. You get a free pass. If you do not use the proper word, this overshadows all the good work you have done in your life.

Why is the label, then, so important, if it is

not about putting more interesting, complicated, brilliant women into the world? In a word: comfort.

If you are surrounded by people who agree with you, you do not have to do much thinking. If you are surrounded by people who identify themselves the same way you do, you do not have to work at constructing a unique identity. If you are surrounded by people who behave the same way you do, you do not have to question your own choices.

How do we come by new feminists, then, if that is what we need? Two ways. The first is by re-branding. Make feminism less threatening and more palatable. Create a way of showing women that no matter how they live their lives, they are already feminists, all they need to do is change their own labels.

In order to do this, we have to kill the dominant idea about what feminism is—and the image we all carry around about what feminism looks like comes to us from the second wave. It's a lot of anger, a lot of body hair. In rejecting this version and refusing to put it into context, feminism helps to erase its own radical past. By try-

ing to distance themselves from the bra-burning, hairy-armpitted bogeywoman, they disown and forget all the good this generation of women did.

It is therefore important to state publicly, as many current feminist writers have, that at certain points feminism "went too far." All those scary women like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, Shulamith Firestone and Germaine Greer—who are condemned by this younger generation of feminists much more often than they are read—become scapegoats as their work is willfully misunderstood and misrepresented in an attempt to convince readers and potential feminists of the universal feminists' reasonableness. You can, they insist, still be a feminist and shave your legs, fuck men, consume misogynistic culture. Look, we're doing it, we call ourselves feminists, you can too.

Next, create a friendlier version of feminism where political and sociological understanding of the pressures under which women attempt to live their lives is replaced with personal choice. For example, everything about our culture may be pushing women toward marriage—from romantic narratives in movies and television to health insurance policies and tax benefits granted by the government. And marriage has historically been a way to control women and reduce them

to being property—the visuals in marriage ceremonies and the words of wife and husband are still heavy with this symbolic meaning. Yet, if you want to get married and you choose to get married, and you identify as feminist, then your getting married is automatically a feminist act.

Once feminism is transformed from a system with which we can interrogate our societies, our relationships, and our own lives, and imagine and create new ways of being, into a method of self-empowerment and self-improvement, then feminism can become universal. Almost any action or any person can now be labeled as feminist.

The second way to increase feminist ranks is to convince women that their lives will be better if they call themselves feminists. In this way, feminism becomes just another self-help system, another voice telling women they should be having better orgasms, making more money, increasing their happiness quotient, wielding more power in their homes and workplaces. The goal here is self-empowerment, a word that many feminists toss around these days. The ability to live a life of one's own choosing, without any focus on what that life could or should be.

Self-help culture necessarily removes the individual from the societal context in which she lives. We decided to think about our problems in

a psychological context rather than a sociological context so that we could at least feel some modicum of control. In this mode, you alone are responsible for your happiness and that happiness is within your control. Self-help culture is also a culture of anxiety. There is always an area of your life that could be improved, and one easily falls into a state of constant assessment and comparison. How is my sex life? I thought it was okay, but this person's sex life seems way better. I wonder if a similar sex life would make me happier. I wonder what she did that I am not doing, how do I make myself deserving of that sex life, she has thinner thighs, if I had thinner thighs I bet I could finally feel really uninhibited in bed.

Women and men who fall into the trap of the self-help mindset spend their time working on their "faults," their weak points, in order to live their best possible lives. Feminism in the self-help mode becomes, then, just another metric to measure, just another process of assessment. So we have books called *Sexy Feminism*, scientific studies about whether feminists have a more satisfying sex or romantic life, personal essays about how feminism helped me get that promotion/have better orgasms. And while there is a vague notion that there is something called the Patriarchy keeping you down, there are few ideas of

how to counteract it, except through individual achievement.

Now that we have removed all meaning from the word *feminism*, our ranks have swelled. We automatically (presto chango) have created an egalitarian society, right? Things have improved all the way around, not just for women but for all people, right?

Converting women to feminism under these conditions does not result in a more fair society or a safer world for women. It is often supposed that acceptance of the feminist label will also result in the acceptance of the meaning behind it, but the meaning has been drained away by this psychotic marketing campaign. A woman can now take up the feminist label without any true political, personal, or relational adaptations whatsoever. It's just another button on her jacket, another sticker on her bumper. The inner contents remain unchanged. All this proselytizing begins to resemble the Christians trying to convert the pagans. ("Really? You have a fertility-related spring festival centered around the egg, the symbol of new life and the powers of procreation? That's so funny, *us too*.") It does not just soothe the minds

of feminists who are experiencing doubt. It also keeps the movement as a whole from questioning why women may not want to associate themselves with it.

If feminism really did make women happier and give them better orgasms and stronger marriages and more money, then the proselytizing would be unnecessary. The fact that it does not do these things, by the way, does not speak poorly of feminism.

Breaking away from the value system and goals of the dominant culture is always going to be a dramatic, and inconvenient, act. Surface-level feminism—feminism that requires only a swapping out of labels and no real reform—requires nothing so strenuous from you. To understand how surface-level contemporary feminism really is, we need only note that the most common markers of feminism's success are the same markers of success in patriarchal capitalism. Namely, money and power. Our metric is how many women are the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, how many bylines at *The New York Times* are women's, what percentage of medical school graduates are women.

We assume the patriarchy will automatically be dismantled if we just manage to get all women to call themselves feminist. A woman CEO can

proudly stand up and proclaim her belief in feminism—after all, it got her to this position of power—while still outsourcing her company's labor to factories where women and children work in slave-like conditions, while still poisoning the atmosphere and water supplies with toxic run-off, and while paying her female employees disproportionately low salaries.

Worse than any of that, however, is the tendency of contemporary feminism to see women in power as an inherent good, women like Hillary Rodham Clinton (who, as a senator, dismantled social welfare programs to the severe detriment of poor women and children, as well as supported international interventions that resulted in the deaths and suffering of thousands of innocent civilians), GM CEO Mary T. Barra (who oversaw the cover-up of the safety issues of her company's products, which led to more than a dozen deaths), and other prominent women whose behavior feminists would be condemning if only their genders were different. Women who conduct themselves as ruthlessly and thoughtlessly as their male peers are not heroes, they are not role models. They may call themselves feminists, getting themselves a free pass by many, but that does not mean they should be celebrated.

This is what happens when feminism gets

hollowed out: anyone feels free to take up the mantle, and terrible things are done in its name. What needs to be restored, and can be restored, is a feminist philosophy, and new ideas of what it means to be moral, what it means to participate in the world, and what it means not simply to destroy something, but to build something new.

2

Women Do Not Have to Be Feminists

Feminism is—should be—a movement, not an excuse to stand still. But when the only authority you need to answer to is yourself, you create a feedback loop of logic. Everything is justifiable, everything somehow rendered feminist.

And yet what is the point of having principles or a philosophical viewpoint if you don't use them to live your life by, to move yourself and your society forward? Dworkin did not take things too far. We didn't take things far enough.

4

How Feminism Ended Up Doing Patriarchy's Work

There is a way a woman can deflect the worst effects of patriarchal control, and that is through money. Make enough of it and you can escape the patriarchy's most obvious trappings. You will be listened to, you will be allowed a space in public life, and you can avoid being forced into a care position like so many other women—you can pay someone else to do that for you. To cook your food, to launder your clothing, to tend to your children. Money is a quick and easy way to check out of many pernicious forms of oppression. And women have more and more of it.

That's what many of us have decided to do: buy our way out of the patriarchy. Most of the ways women are kept under control can be thwarted financially, from paying for medical services many women cannot afford to circum-

venting legal inequalities with hired lawyers and respectability.

Every institution in my native country, the United States, from the justice system to the banking industry, from real estate to the educational system, is a product of, and a means of support to, the patriarchy. Marriage is a patriarchal support. Consumer culture is a patriarchal support.

Our educational system exploits its teachers and adjuncts, privileges the moneyed. How much money you have determines the quality of education you receive, and it often drives the non-moneyed further into poverty by saddling them with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. This is a form of patriarchal control. In marriage, men benefit from higher salaries and better health while women still carry the burden of lowered income, longer hours of housework, and child care. This is a form of patriarchal control.

The patriarchy is more than a matter of a woman's personal freedom. It is not us versus them. It is the system by which the powerful maintain their position through the control and the oppression of the many. Misogyny, as well as racism, homophobia, and whatever word we will come up with to classify the pretty obvious fear and hatred of the impoverished that dominates

our public life, is a logical outgrowth of the patriarchy. In order to take advantage of someone, in order to think of them as a resource to be exploited, it helps to dehumanize them.

It follows that women who are a part of the system are not necessarily any better, morally speaking, than the men who developed and maintained it. Women are now lawyers and judges who put innocent men and women in jail, who exploit the poor, who support institutionalized racism. Women are now politicians who are rewarding the mega-rich with even more money at the expense of the poor.

When an industry has gone off the rails, like Wall Street or Silicon Valley, you hear this a lot: "They just need more women. Women have more common sense, more empathy. It's just a boys club run wild." This is illogical. It's humans, not men, who are the problem here.

Now that women are raised with access to power, we will not see a more egalitarian world, but the same world, just with more women in it.

The feminist and civil rights movements shared a common goal: to dismantle the hierarchy by which Western society had been organized for

centuries. At the top rested the landowning and moneyed white men. Beneath them was everyone else, although the order of the lower levels shifted through the ages. But these movements destroyed the hierarchy, putting everyone on a theoretically level playing field. It's obviously still an incomplete job, but with every generation of white boys who are not raised to believe they have dominion over everyone else, and every generation of everyone else who is not raised to believe they must be subservient, these identifying markers of race and sex will no longer guarantee your place in society.

Why, then, are women still operating within systems of power? Because we have replaced gender and race with money and power. Now you can buy your position in society rather than have to be born with the right genetics. Now that we have access as women, women in positions of power are much less likely to attempt to dismantle this system of inequality. Power feels good. Capitalism feels good. It gives you things, as long as its boot is not on your neck.

Certainly, there have been many men throughout time who understood that the hierarchy of gender and race was inherently immoral and unjust. But white men were never going to rise up en masse to destroy it and grant liberty and equal

rights to all. It suited them too well. Even if they did not have power themselves, they had at least the possibility of gaining it in the future. Power is blinding.

This is also why universal feminism will always be toothless. Because a feminism that springs from self-interest, that is embraced because it more easily gives access to power—rather than being embraced out of any social awareness—will necessarily be part of this system of power and oppression, and so meaningless as a way toward universal human rights. Women are now active participants in this system and they are benefiting from it.

Gone are the days when all women were united behind a single cause. Your ability to break away from subjugation is different from mine, and that is due to differences in race, attractiveness, personal history, class, location, education, occupation, and so on. To insist that all women's experiences or desires are the same is folly: they simply are not.

When women as a whole were discriminated against due to biological facts, and that discrimination was written directly into the law books, it made sense to claim solidarity. There were universal needs and universal obstacles that could bind us together.

But today my subjugation will look different from yours. The obstacles I face are different than the obstacles you face, because most of the universal obstacles have been removed. We also have to accept that some of the obstacles that we call misogyny are not actually discrimination against women. We are women, but it might be more helpful to think of ourselves as humans first.

This brings into question why we still need feminism. To finish the job of destroying the hierarchy, sure. There are issues of reproductive rights, sexual violence, and so on, that are still active barriers to women's freedom. We should not become complacent and stop fighting. Our lives and the lives of the generation to come will still require struggle.

But if we are moving toward parity—and all educational, entrepreneurial, economic, and public office holding rates, when we look at the median woman's advance, suggest that we are—does it make sense to base our ideology around our biological identities? With our needs, our desires, our obstacles, and our circumstances so diverse, what unifies us? We also have to consider what we lose by insisting women are distinctly

different from men, how that myth both serves us and hurts us.

Here is one way feminism is still a useful idea: Almost all of us have been marginalized in one way or another due to our gender. That marginalization should allow us to see that it's the whole system that is corrupt. Being marginalized should give women the perspective and power to see the system's workings and its dark heart.

This version of feminism, which could do much to change society as a whole, is at a powerful moment; because we have people on the inside as well as the outside. We are at the city's walls, but we have also infiltrated the center. If we were able to align ourselves and see that the whole thing needed to come down—this society based on greed, this society that is killing so many through poverty, violence, and exploitation—we could do it.

Unfortunately, many will think the only thing wrong with the system—and by “system” I mean this whole complicated world that we inadequately convey with words like “patriarchy” or “capitalism”—is that it is not allowing them entry. The whole thing is rigged to include some and exclude others, to benefit some and exploit others, therefore it is evil. By fighting for your own way to inclusion, you are not improving the

system, you are simply joining the ranks of those included and benefiting. You are doing your own excluding and exploiting. In other words: you, a woman, are also the patriarchy.

If we accept our marginalization, we can take a moment to think about what kind of world we would be participating in if we were granted inclusion. Because once women are fully accepted—and this day is coming—once we wield power instead of having power wielded against us, there will be no time to pause and reflect. Simply put, once we are a part of the system and benefiting from it on the same level that men are, we won't care, as a group, about whose turn it is to get hurt. But we carry obligations toward everyone we share space with, just by virtue of sharing space with them. And those obligations come before any of our own so-called rights or entitlements.

We keep losing women to participation in the system, instead of insubordination to the system. The idea that you can make the strongest impact by influencing the culture from the inside is naive at best, disingenuous at worst.

It is one thing, for example, to go to law school

for the explicit purpose of devoting your life to protecting the vulnerable from the system. That is insubordination. That devotion requires a radicalization process that is rarely encouraged in feminist culture these days. To be radicalized, you often have to be mentored through the process, and there are few active radical feminists today who are listened to and who are included in the current conversation.

This idea that women will “change the culture” of any given industry is an easy lie to buy into. Even if women go in with good intentions, good intentions are nothing against the system. The system is older than you. It has absorbed more venom than you can ever hope to emit. You will not even slow it down.

In order to gain entry, you will have to exhibit the characteristics of the patriarchs who built it. In order to advance, you will have to mimic their behavior, take on their values. Their values are power, the love of power, and the display of power. By then, you are part of their culture.

Few will want to admit their real reasons for buying into the system. It's nice in there. It feels good. You get things. If you say things people want to hear, people will listen to you. Attention feels good. If you value power, people will give you power, and with that comes money, luxury,

a way out of all of that oppression and misery. Little thought will be given to those left on the outside.

Once you get to that place, you are not so much a sell-out as a buyer-in.

And trust me: people will hate you if you choose freedom over money, if you decide to live a life by your values of compassion, honesty, and integrity. Because you will remind them of their own deficiencies in these areas.

It's lonely outside the system. But we need you out here.

The other power our marginalization could give us is the ability to align and empathize with the others who are also on the outs. All those labeled worthless by those in charge, from people of color to religious minorities to the poor. There could be an alliance there.

The fact that there is not only not an alliance, but that feminism has been guilty throughout its history of rampant racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other failures of empathy, shows that the mainstream goal was always participation in the system, rather than its destruction. The goal was to share in the power, not to reveal this pow-

erful/powerless dynamic as evil. The only thing that made the system evil in our eyes was that we were not granted access. We saw, and still see, the other marginalized not as our equals, but as competition for power once the hierarchy falls.

Being marginalized should have awoken us to how the system works. It should have made us acutely aware of the other vulnerable populations, the other people who were not protected. Instead it made us selfish. It made us focused on our own advancement, our own entitlement. Fighting for your own self-interest, without the awareness of your motives or the ramifications of your success, does not make you a hero. It makes you the same as any other selfish, ambitious jerk.

Right now, women are in a unique position. We are halfway in. We are on both sides of the powerful/powerless dynamic. It should be easy, then, to rip the fucker apart by pulling on both sides.

You will not find eager volunteers, though, among those on power's side, for obvious reasons. Neither on the powerless side. The position of the powerless is often a state of being primed for acquisition. As long as there is a glimmer of

a chance that they can switch sides, even if that glimmer is a complete illusion, people will fight to keep the system that oppresses them in place. Just in case they are finally given the opportunity to oppress someone else for a change.

5

Self-Empowerment
Is Just Another Word
for *Narcissism*

6

The Fights We Choose

The targets of feminism, particularly Internet feminism, are individual acts of misogyny. Once a questionable act is committed, both men and women are brought up for review and (if found lacking) punishment is doled out, usually in the form of an organized attempt to get the man or woman fired from his or her job.

In the past few years, watching this from the sidelines, I've seen the process play out for people accused of alleged rape and harassment, high-profile cases of unequal pay, misogynist statements by politicians, writers, and other men in power, a second wave feminist who was unfamiliar with the relatively new phrase "intersectional," feminist essays that did not adequately align with the particular feminist sensibilities of certain online commenters, an older man who

made an awkward joke, and a rocket scientist who wore the wrong shirt to a press conference.

Names are called out, protests are organized, hashtags are circulated. The results are generally the same: either the figure doubles down on the unpopular position, or an institution, trying to avoid public humiliation or a boycott, quickly discards the offending individual and replaces them.

Much has already been written about "outrage culture," usually by potential targets. They claim we are living in a coddled culture, that women have lost their sense of humor, that the backlash to perceived misogyny is way out of proportion to the initial act. They call it "political correctness gone mad."

I don't really care about any of that. Whether this man was unjustly fired, whether this woman deserved the unhinged emails she received for weeks. In the grand scheme of things, a man facing outsized consequences for an unconscious and poorly considered deed or expression does not really compare to the day-to-day consequences women face for existing in public in a patriarchal society.

But my shrug is a problem. When I heard about Tim Hunt, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist who was removed from his post at a uni-

versity because he told a bad joke taken out of context by someone online, I didn't really care. I felt that because he was an old white man, surely he had done other sexist things that merited his being fired, even if one joke shouldn't be enough to destroy a career. I believe my response was something along the lines of, "Another old fool, raised to believe women are inferior to men intellectually. It's now catching up to him." Just another dude, being a dude, feeling the repercussions of being a dude. The fact that a bunch of male scientists and commentators immediately began to shake their fists about "lynch mobs" and "political correctness gone mad" hardened my position that Hunt losing his job did not actually matter.

Eventually, my not caring started to bother me, particularly once I read the context of the joke. (Hunt had joked in a speech that women should not be allowed in the laboratory with men, because they are always falling in love with the men and getting distracted. The vital piece of information missing from this discussion was that this was how he met his wife, who was next to him at the time.) Socially awkward man makes a "take my wife . . . please" joke at a scientific function, it's heard by the wrong person, and suddenly he has no friends anywhere. The Royal

Society immediately distanced themselves, and he was sacked in a matter of days.

The sequence of events revealed that there was someone in the audience coiled and waiting to lash out. Someone wanted and was ready to take someone down. It is, in a way, understandable. Women have faced a great deal of misogyny in the sciences. A woman who has excelled in the field has inevitably faced everything from unconscious discouragement in her education to the jokey boys club atmosphere of the laboratory to a lack of real mentoring to outright discrimination when seeking employment or promotions. That person is going to have, and rightly so, a lot of rage built up over the span of her career.

But the audience member who started the attack on Tim Hunt is not the only one coiled. Consider the institutions who removed their support for Hunt without even a review of the circumstances. They must have seen this play out in the past, the way a protest like this so quickly becomes entrenched and how unwelcome "outrage" feminists have become to a nuanced conversation. There was Hunt's university, which fired him without hesitation—again, because of a bad joke—because they have seen protests get out of control on campuses in the past and wanted to nip this in the bud. Every woman who retweeted

the original attack on Hunt, every woman who immediately called for Hunt's head, they were all coiled and ready to believe the worst about someone, simply because the target was a straight, white, older man who worked in the sciences. Or, simply because he was a man. They felt sure enough of his guilt (and were ready enough to take someone down) without checking to make sure he said what his original attacker claimed.

Hunt's peers who used a thoughtless phrase ("lynch mob") to describe the actions of the feminist protestors, they had been waiting to lash out, too. More than a few of them probably knew that this could have happened to them just as easily if someone had had a phone set to record at an unguarded moment.

Revenge has become an official part of feminist policy. I can be blasé about a man losing his job and finding a lifetime of work dismissed all because he happened to tell a bad joke. As can a great number of women and feminist activists, which is why there has been so little push back on this cycle within the feminist community. There is a downside here. The longer we stay trapped in this destructive dynamic, the less we are using our energy for something constructive. We think we are doing something productive through these individual acts of revenge. And most of the

feminist culture remains unconscious as to why this is a repeating pattern of behavior and why outrage culture feels so good.

We all keep a list buried deep within us, a list of every injustice, every indignity, every time we were rendered powerless and, instead of fighting back or speaking up, we did nothing. This is the list that powers outrage culture.

We forget to think critically about this list, to determine which incidents were the result of misogyny, which were the result of just bad luck or shit that happens, or maybe that some of this was actually our fault. Misdirected rage is not only destructive—because everyone has some and many are willing to fire where you say to aim—it is also foolish and embarrassing. Too little examination of your own list and you become that girl who sued the university that rejected her, saying it was affirmative action that filled the university with subpar minority students rather than her own painful mediocrity in grades, test scores, and activities. It's a convenient outlet, outrage. We use it to avoid the hard work of self-examination.

We also forget that other people have their own lists because of things we have done. People

of other races, people from other countries, people of different sexualities, they have all had to deal with our stupid thoughtlessness, that thing we said or wrote, that shove we gave, or even just the way we looked at them, waiting for them to exhibit some sort of terrible behavior so that we could feel justified about expecting the worst from them. No one is perfectly enlightened. Even straight men have these lists, and a lot of those lists have valid entries.

The way we show up on other people's lists should give us insight into discriminating between what is thoughtless behavior and what is malicious behavior. There is a huge difference between them. The moment we think, say, or behave in a way that is, for example, racist, if that moment is willingly examined and not denied or shrugged off, it should help us understand where these beliefs come from.

What is the root of that stupid racist thought? Is it a pure expression of what you actually think or believe about this person and the group they belong to? Or do we take on so much influence from our society and our media (which are all fundamentally and institutionally racist, homophobic, xenophobic, and sexist) that there are unchecked corners of our mind where that influence has been spreading, unnoticed? We

hide these moments because we are rightfully ashamed and we know what can come of them. Pretending those moments do not exist allows us to sit in judgment upon those who maybe have less control over their darker regions.

This is not to say individuals bear no responsibility for these moments of bias and hate. We do. It is our job, as citizens, to go out of our way to examine and understand this influence, and then undermine its power through education, consuming the culture produced by other groups, listening, and, above all, empathy. Understanding our own weakness should help us understand that the core of misogyny (and racism, and homophobia, etc.) lies not in the heart of the individual but in the way our society is structured. We should understand that going after misogyny individual by individual will be about as effective as someone calling you out for your own hidden prejudice. No matter how we try to cleanse ourselves, the core remains, until we who are willing to fight turn our focus from the distraction to the source.

We are not encouraged to do this hard work, because we are all spending too much time tending to our own lists. With everyone focused on their own outrage, it's difficult to create new patterns.

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There is a difference between outrage and having standards. Outrage feminists are like the Furies, demanding an eye for an eye. Or an eye for an eyelash. A job for a joke. That need lives in all of us, and we're fucked if we feed it.

Standards of behavior, which, fine, can be labeled "political correctness" if you like, require that everyone live up to a certain expectation of humanity. If someone violates those standards in a serious way, through violence or outright hatred, that person should be set up for punishment. But if someone simply fails to live up to a certain expectation of humanity, then that person should be, not banished, but disagreed with. Their action should start a conversation. We, if we are going to demand a certain standard of behavior, should also meet that standard ourselves. Existing in a community means tolerating hard moments and allowing for other people's weaknesses, so that our hard moments are tolerated and our weaknesses are allowed.

We do not like to pay attention to how the casual demonization of white straight men follows the

same pattern of bias and hatred that fuels misogyny, racism, and homophobia. It might not count as sexism because it does not have institutional power behind it, but it follows the same lazy thinking, easy scapegoating, and pleasurable anger that all other forms of hatred have.

My argument here is not that we need to protect men from this hatred. At its worst, this hatred is going to hurt feelings and create anger and resentment. My argument is that we need to protect ourselves from falling into this lazy trap. It feels good to be antagonistic, to create an "I'm-in, you're-out" kind of club. But that way of thinking, speaking, and writing is totally devoid of value. Dismissing someone for being a white, straight male lowers us to the level of an ideologue. When this white male scapegoat becomes code for boring, privileged, and mediocre, it means we are no longer thinking, we are simply repeating stereotypes. It's reductive in the same way that all stereotypes are reductive.

We also have to think about what kind of intellectual environment we want to live in. An environment where we strong-arm dissidence and varied opinion is an environment devoid of possibility and dynamism. With the feminist audience putting so much emphasis on proper

language and terminology, with so little regard for the legitimacy and power of the ideas beneath the surface, feminist discourse has become shallow. And when even minor disagreements can be exaggerated as attacks and abuse, this does not allow much space for writers to work out complicated ideas in public.

We might think it preferable never to be challenged, but it turns out surrounding yourself only with people who agree with you leads to degraded thought. Using the excuse that men have controlled and dominated the conversation for centuries does not justify using their methods to try to wrench control our way.

We need a sharp-edged feminism that does not shy away from the big battles we have yet to face. If we want to create a better world, we need the foundations to be different, not to be the same foundations patriarchy was built on. But this is the sticky problem that it is going to be hard to circumvent: most women are not fundamentally better than most men. Unless the conversation moves away from the mire in which it's become stuck—away from the outrage cycle that feels so good but is devoid of substance—we risk changing the world in an interior-designer kind of way. The basic structure is the same, but aren't the new curtains nice?

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What does outrage actually accomplish? There was probably a moment when calling out the actions of some guy opened up a conversation, something along the lines of: How can we be more supportive of women in science? But that moment has passed. Now the only people allowed to talk at all after something like the Hunt affair are the women who suffered similar stories. They cluster together, tell each other how much they've had to overcome, and threaten retribution against anyone who dares to challenge their version of events.

Outrage is now met with quick fixes—one person fired, another person driven from Twitter, another person forced into an insincere public apology—and people are learning not to speak up. Not telling the sexist joke does not mean the underlying sexism no longer exists. People just get better at hiding their prejudices. Making racial slurs socially unacceptable has obviously not done anything to create a less racist world, as evidenced by the brutal slayings of black men and women by the police force. It's unlikely that banning all sexist jokes, then, will do anything to create a better environment for women. Quick fixes are not enough, political correctness that

is not matched with institutional change is ineffective, and disproportionate punishment does nothing but create resentment and fear.

Responding to our own personal outrage keeps misogyny on a personal level. It keeps us going person by person, trying to root out any hidden psychological damage, any deep hatred or mommy issues. The outward expression of misogyny is the distraction; the individual misogynist is the symptom, not the cause. Taking out one individual at a time does not decrease the amount of misogyny in the world. The system we live in, a system that rewards competition and violence, a system that devalues compassion and care, will keep spitting out misogynists until the system itself is addressed.

We move away from outrage culture when we accept that there is no way to win this fight we're all engaged in. We cannot create a safe world by dealing with misogyny on an individual basis. It is our entire culture, the way it runs on money, rewards inhumanity, encourages disconnection and isolation, causes great inequality and suffering, that's the enemy. That is the only enemy worth fighting.

Fighting against the entire structure, though, means that we will probably not see true success in our lifetime. And progress might be so slow that we rarely feel it.

Outrage culture, despite being unproductive, if not entirely counter-productive, feels good because at least there appears to be a chance of winning. If we can vanquish one foe, if we can take down one man with sexism in his heart, then we have improved the world, one tiny bit. It feels like an accomplishment. But another person will just take his place. And perhaps this person will better know how to control the external manifestations of his internal hatred.

This system is shit, and it is against us. That is why we need to be cunning about where we put our intellectual energy. Wasting it on fighting Twitter bros and calling for the execution of harmless old men is not an efficient use of our time, energy, and resources.

7

Men Are Not Our Problem