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ENLS 1010-08

11/15/17

### Power

Sexual assault has been on my mind quite a bit lately. It is on everyone's mind, but to someone who has a worsening twitter addiction discourse on sexual assault has been unavoidable. However, in spite of the increasingly undeniable scale of rape culture, there has yet to be meaningful examination by the mainstream media of the underlying reason that these assaults take place. People cannot come up with the reason Harvey Weinstein or Louis C.K. or Kevin Spacey or Roy Moore committed their assaults outside of them not realizing what they were doing was wrong or that they are just rotten perverts. As it turns out, it is that first excuse, that they didn't realize that their sexual harassments and assaults were wrong, that is the closest to the mark. Sexual assault, whether against adults in the case of the Weinstein and C.K. or against children in the case of Spacey and Moore, is not about perversion. It is about power. Whether that power is wielded consciously or unconsciously is not relevant, as intentions are of little comfort to victims. This power is rooted in the toxic gender roles our society creates, and must be examined to understand why sexual assault is so prevalent. To interrogate the role power plays in sexual assault, I pose two questions: Why does sexual assault happen, and why is sexual assault so prevalent?

An important note before I begin in earnest. It is important not to conflate gender roles with the bodies that perform them (Pascoe 5). This is because gendered, and particularly sexual

violence is not always as simple as a male assaulter/female victim dichotomy as is emphasized in that paper. This erases male victims, and should be avoided. Furthermore, while sexual violence is generally perpetrated by men, there are cases of female assaulters. Much more demonstrative are cases of sexual harassment by both males and females, showing that while abuse is certainly based in a framework of masculine power, it is not exclusive to the male body. Also, I will at times use sexual assault interchangeably for acts of sexual violence such as rape and what one might call “mere harassment.” I hope that in the context of my piece which one I am discussing at any one moment, but I should point out that from a perspective of power the acts are linked and rather substitutable, as one is merely the physical application of the action the other implies.

The role power plays prior to an assault will provide the best answer to the first of my posed questions: why does a person sexually assault or harass another person? To understand why assaults occur, we should first come to terms with who the assaulter is. Studies tell us that the person most likely to rape you is your sexual partner (RAINN). The terrifying spectacle of prison rape is generally perpetrated by guards, not inmates (RAINN). We can observe that men like Weinstein preyed on employees (Traister) while Moore hid behind his role as a prosecutor (Graham). The common thread here is power. Our concepts of male and female gender roles create uneven power levels in relationships. In *The Woman Identified Woman*, the group Radicalesbians claims that these power dynamics are all too often brought in to spaces where men are absent, with some women taking the masculine role of dominator (Radicalesbians 3). We can see that the inequities of power found in our romantic relationships are little different from the inequities we find beneath a boss, and that both can lead to similar results, with the empowered individual feeling an ownership of and a right to the body of the disempowered. But how can we fight these dynamics? How can we overcome this gap in power, whether it is

wielded by a supposed partner or a boss? The manifesto proposes the raising of our conscious to create an identity for women not based in opposition to an oppressor but in solidarity with the oppressed (Radicalesbians 4). Alex Press of *Jacobin*, when addressing the issue of sexual assault in the workplace, identifies the allegations against Weinstein and others as a form of impromptu collective action (Press). Her argument, with which I agree, is that through formal collective action, we can disempower bosses and prevent assault and harassment through the equalization of power in the workplace. These two arguments, both rooted in feminist principles, are certainly key in the prevention of sexual assault. They complement each other, identifying power as the source of sexual abuse and conceiving ways to attack that power.

The question becomes, is the strength of those ideas enough to safeguard our society from sexual violence? I worry that it may not be. Certainly, the collective action of a group of waitresses could overcome the predations of a manager, and rebalancing interpersonal dynamics could curb the rape culture that sits in college campuses and at homes. However, there are cases in which collective power can falter. After all, many of the actresses Weinstein assaulted are prominent members of the SAG. They are wealthy and influential members of what is surely one of the more powerful unions in the country. Yet it has taken years for them to even be able to speak out. If the power of an individual plays a critical role in causing assault, that power becomes magnified when it comes to seeking justice. That is because when we look at the top of our power structures, the media moguls and judges and presidents sit upon a fast network of power. Their individual power is dwarfed by the collective power of those below them, yet it serves as a keystone in an arch of patronage. In recent news, that protection of the patron has manifested in the revelations that prominent actors pressured Weinstein's victims to stay quiet (Zimmerman). Journalist Rebecca Traister recounted her experiences with journalists attempting

to expose Weinstein. She detailed his willingness to physically assault journalists who questioned him. She recalls how she was unable to report on allegations made against him in 2000 due to his support for the Gore campaign. Furthermore, she questions whether he will ever face real consequences for his actions (Traister). Her concerns are not without merit. Whatever punishment Weinstein faces, he will probably remain wealthy. He may no longer be invited to parties, to take pictures with the Clintons, but he will live a life far more secure and comfortable than the lives of his victims.

But the power Weinstein wields is built on money. There are far more secure sources of power than that. In the case of Roy Moore, that power is drawn from faith. Moore is accused of using his position as a prosecutor to assault teenage girls as young as fourteen (Burton). Yet, those who support his politics are willing to hold their noses and see him into power, just to prevent a democrat from taking power. Why? Because “if a Democrat wins a Senate seat, it is a wrench in God’s plan for the world” (Burton). Moore’s personal power becomes sublimated due to the importance of his position to the movement that supports him, the radical evangelical base of the Republican party in Alabama. Whatever the cost to one’s personal morals, the power of that group must be maintained, even if that means sending a predator like Moore to Washington. But we should not be lulled into thinking that the broad left of American politics is beyond reproach. Such an approach leaves the Democratic Party vulnerable to “whataboutism” centered on accusations that they must reckon with (Greenfield).

We know that sexual assault comes from power, and that a key component to combatting it is to combat the unconditional support that assaulters receive in return for patronage. Since Anita Hill we have understood the importance of believing women (Flanagan). Yet for every Bill O’Reilly there is a Louis C.K. For every Roger Ailes there is a Harvey Weinstein. For every Roy

Moore or Clarence Thomas there is a Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton has three prominent accusations against him. All are about as credible as these accusations tend to be (Flanagan). Yes, they are tainted by the role of right-wing media in pressing their stories, as my mother would be quick to remind me. This does not change the fact that when a woman accuses a man of rape, it is almost always true (Reid). When you consider the context of Clinton's willingness to sexually engage a subordinate, one must view the accusations as true (Flanagan). However, this was not enough to deter support for Clinton by his party. But among Clinton's most loyal supporters were feminists who had been outraged by the treatment of Anita Hill. Gloria Steinem was among them, yet she quite forcefully "slut-shamed, victim-blamed, and age-shamed" the two accusers she chose to address while ignoring Juanita Broaddrick's accusations of a violent assault outright in her 1998 op-ed in *The New York Times* (Flanagan). An image of that op-ed includes the rather shameful pull-quote "It's not harassment and we're not hypocrites" (Flanagan). Those accusations remain a thorn in the belly of the Democratic Party, and will likely remain so as long as the Clintons remain at the party's core.

How are we supposed to fight sexual assault when the party that supports supposedly feminist politics continues to cover for the kind of moral bankruptcy that they heap on the Republicans for their support of Roy Moore? The answer for me remains unchanged; we must stand in solidarity with victims and in opposition to offenders and oppressors. This is not an easy path. It means we must be as willing to fight predators who position themselves as allies as we are to fight those we know oppose us. When power is held by an individual, it is too easily corrupted. We must fight to forge a power that is intrinsically collective, free from the dangerous effects of hierarchies that toxic masculinity replicates. That connection, between toxic masculinity and the patriarchal structures it creates, but not be forgotten. Men without a

consciousness of those structures view women's bodies as objects to which their masculine power grants them entitlement, and men and women who defend them benefit from their allegiance to that power as well. Our task is to fight that patriarchy and its willing benefactors in whatever guise they wear.

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