

# Book Reviews



Neil Lyndon, *Sexual Impolitics*, Amazon, 2014.

Neil Lyndon's *Sexual Impolitics*, should be on the reading list of every course on gender—that is, on both women and men. The author is a journalist, not an academic. His book is more accessible than many treatises to anyone who can read and think. At any rate, it is both entertaining and blunt. It is free of both dense theorizing, moreover, and political correctness. It is a *cri de coeur*, a passionate and energetic response to the destructive sexual polarization of our time and therefore an appropriate topic for analysis by those who claim to care about sexual or any other form of justice.

Whether this book actually will appear on academic reading lists is another matter. Lyndon tells readers how his adversaries either attacked his writings or ignored them and how he eventually lost his job for persevering in his attempt to explore the anomalies and contradictions in some feminist literature. He writes, in short, of being silenced (which is something that many feminists consider a problem unique to women). As a male academic who writes about misandry, I know that many of my colleagues—both female and male—will either ignore my books and those of my co-author or prevent them from being published in the first place. Silencing dissenters is not only less messy but also more effective, after all, than attacking them. Our adversaries will do so no matter how thoroughly documented our research and no matter how formal or neutral our style, simply

because we do not support the current orthodoxy—by which I mean ideas that are supposedly immune to criticism. They will allow no one to challenge any feminist theory except from the perspective of its effect on women or sexual minorities (or, in some cases, on other minorities as well). This is not an argument for abandoning scholarship, however, in favor of journalism. It is an argument for listening just as carefully and compassionately, or at least as prudently, to men as to women.

To the extent that I find anything lacking in this book, it would be a discussion of war as the primary paradigm of masculine identity in Western societies since the late eighteenth century. More specifically, I refer to the advent of “universal” (male) military conscription in Revolutionary France. For the first time, a government linked citizenship with military service. Women did not have to become soldiers, so they did not become full citizens. Because all men did have to become soldiers, at least in theory, this became the fate that all men shared and that all men had to prepare for in one way or another. It was, lamentably, the source of their collective identity as men. Like the sexual revolution, this military revolution was both profound and unprecedented. Earlier regimes sometimes forced ordinary men into service (leaving enough men to produce food for the state and without weapons to threaten the state), but they saw no need to justify this form of oppression with any philosophy about a social contract. Rulers had power, and everyone expected them to use it for good or ill (although their ability to enforce measures of this kind was somewhat limited before the rise of modern bureaucracies). But it would be foolish to expect Lyndon or any other author to cover every topic.

Lyndon’s greatest insight is that the current state of affairs is not the result of some titanic and historic conspiracy of men against women. Women have indeed faced marginalization in the public realm until very recently, he says, but not because men have hated women and therefore subjugated them. The characteristic functions of women both historically and cross-culturally are due instead, he says, to the obvious fact that only women could gestate and lactate. To survive, therefore every society had to ensure that women could give birth to and care for infants. And this led, at least in our society, to what women now (but did not always) see as confined lives. That changed, radically, with the very recent advent of reliable contraception and legalized abortion. Suddenly, after countless millennia, women were free to reject or put off motherhood. And this meant that they were also free, for the first time in history, to leave the private realm and enter the public one. At first, both sexes enjoyed their new freedom from ancient restrictions. It was not always easy to break away from deeply engrained notions of family life, let alone propriety, but profound social and other cultural changes came nonetheless and with remarkable speed. Far from facing implacable hatred from young men, young women found support from them. After all, young men wanted the responsibilities and burdens of manhood (those of their fathers and earlier male ancestors) no more than young women wanted the responsibilities and burdens of womanhood (those of their mothers and earlier female ancestors). As hippies, for instance, both young men and young women celebrated the new order.

And yet, it all went wrong. The hippies were naïve. After approximately one decade, women were beginning to feel ambivalent about their own freedoms, let alone those of men. Some women found that change was coming too quickly; they wanted their careers but also children and listened with increasing anxiety to the ticking of their “biological clocks.” Other women found that change was not coming quickly enough; they blamed men for not being sensitive enough to their needs either in the workplace or the home. Nonetheless, no social revolution in history had ever moved so

quickly. Almost overnight, in historical terms, governments (relying on the votes of both women and men) rewrote laws and institutions revised policies with women in mind.

This brings me to a mystery that neither Lyndon nor I can explain fully: the emergence of ideologically oriented feminism, with its ultimate focus on the conspiracy theory of history (also known as the origin of patriarchy) and the resulting implacable hostility toward men. Unlike egalitarian feminists, ideological feminists rejected reform and embraced revolution. And to do that they needed an enemy class. Lyndon points out the parallels between their rhetoric and those of Marxist rhetoric. The new “bourgeoisie” were men, the new “proletarians” women. I agree, but I think that ideological feminists tapped an additional source, albeit unwittingly. I refer to the nationalism or even racism that Romanticism had fostered. The notion of class warfare was not very different from that of race warfare (although, in theory if not always in practice, members of one class could defect to the other). And sexual warfare is very close to racial warfare, because both sex and race are biological categories with innate characteristics. In any case, neither idea was new in the nineteenth century; both emerged from long histories in the West (and not only in the West) of dualism: “us” versus “them.” Lyndon is correct in noting the obvious fact that ideological feminists have openly promoted contempt for men as an enemy class. As he puts it, many women believe that all men are Idi Amin. (Here in Montreal, many believed, and said, that all men are Marc Lépine, the mass murderer who shot fourteen women before shooting himself in 1989). Lyndon adds that some feminist books or essays would be indistinguishable from Nazi ones by replacing the word “Jews” with “men.” And even women who rejected that approach in theory often trivialized, ignored or even condoned it in practice, nonetheless, as a way of “pushing the envelope” for women.

In effect, writes Lyndon, feminism has become a “secular faith.” And I agree. My own research in the field of religious studies has focused on that very phenomenon: political ideologies that come to function very much (though not quite completely) as religions do. They provide adherents with meaning, purpose, moral principles, myths, rituals, symbols, pilgrimage sites, special days, special writings, communities and, most important of all, collective identity. But I will return to that.

Much of Lyndon’s book is about the results of this mentality. It was in this context, for instance, that countless jurisdictions rewrote their legal codes. Doing so made it easier for women to divorce their husbands and take full custody of the children, for unmarried women to sue their partners for alimony, for women to sue men for creating or ignoring workplace environments that women might find offensive, for courts to make allegations of rape easier for women to “prove,” for police officers to arrest men—not women—after allegations of domestic violence without requiring any proof and so on.

It was in this context, too, that companies and universities rewrote their policies on contact between the sexes. Codes of sexual etiquette on campus, for instance, now require one partner (usually the man) to gain an explicit and even enthusiastic “yes” not only to sexual overtures but to every step along the way to intercourse. Those who fail to provide a “preponderance” of evidence to defend themselves soon end up behind closed doors with access to neither lawyers nor their accusers. Students now have a right to sue their professors (usually men) for stating facts that make them feel “uncomfortable” in class. And then, there is affirmative action to hire more women than would otherwise be likely (even though, with so many more male students than female students dropping out

of school, that premise will soon be very hard to sustain).

And it was in this context that academics reversed their stance on the study of sexual difference. For a brief period, they had opposed any research that might reveal sexual differences. They had assumed that any differences would favor men, not women. Within two decades they began to *emphasize* any research that might reveal sexual differences. They assumed now that any differences would favor women, of course, not men. At the same time, universities set up departments of women's studies, which promoted the works of both egalitarian and ideological feminists. (Later on, these became departments of "gender studies," even though the focus remained exclusively on promoting the interests of women and sometimes sexual minorities.)

At the moment, how many researchers or politicians worry about the fact that so many more men than women are killing themselves or dropping out of either school (to become an economic underclass) or society (a criminal underclass)? For that matter, how many worry about the fact that men in our time do not even live as long as women? How many tax dollars go to pay for research on that?

Now, all of these punitive measures and double standards make sense only on the assumption that men deserve collective punishment and that women deserve collective revenge. If it were true that men embody collective guilt for crimes against women in the past, apparently, then maybe they should expect collective suffering in the present (even if only to "level the playing field" for women). Men are the means to an end, in other words, not ends in themselves. This mentality is definitely not what egalitarian feminists have ever had in mind. Nor does it produce the kind of world that most women have ever wanted for their own sons.

Questions remain. How did we get here? More specifically, why did many women embrace, or at least condone, theories that rely on the explicit or implicit demonization of men? And why have feminists only recently begun to acknowledge this as a feminist problem? I think that the early man-haters obviously had, or believed that they had, something to gain by heaping ridicule, contempt and malice on men. Some of them must have believed that they had nothing much to lose by separating themselves from men or even separating all women from men. Lyndon argues, however, that sexually liberated women suddenly experienced a great horror. They were suddenly terrified of male sexuality, in other words, and therefore associated it with implacable evil. They might well have experienced a great horror, but I suggest that they were terrified mainly of their own newly revealed sexuality and projected that onto men. In any case, most women do not want to sever themselves completely from men. So, why do they condone the ranting of those who do? One obvious answer would be that they do so in the interest of political expediency: closing ranks against anyone who challenges a feminist claim no matter how grotesque that claim might be. And what about male feminists? Why do they use ideological versions of feminism to attack other men? They consider themselves honorary women, I suggest, and therefore believe that they are exempt, as repentant sinners, from the charges. They buy self-respect (and presumably respect from women) at the cost of separating themselves from other men.

But I think that one thing is clear. Feminists did not invent radical dualism, which has long been a characteristic feature of some theological ideologies, fundamentalist ones in our time, and

has therefore become a characteristic feature of all secular religions—that is, of all political ideologies on both the left and the right. The appeal of religion in an increasingly secular age, its secular equivalents, is hard to ignore. No matter how loathsome and dangerous these religions or secular religions are for outsiders, they clearly serve a need for insiders that modernity per se does not serve. We ignore history, including our own history, especially since the 1930s, at our own peril.

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