

Book Reviews



David Benatar, *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. ISBN: 978-0-470-67451-2. US \$29.95

Ironically, perhaps the chief benefit of the feminist movement will have been to bring the reality of anti-male sexism to full social consciousness. Drawing attention to females as a group of human beings with distinctive features has required drawing attention to males as their unique complement. In the process, culturally systemic and heretofore unacknowledged discrimination against most males has become vividly clear, albeit so far to only a small number of scholars. David Benatar's seminal work provides both evidence for endemic anti-male sexism and why it has been overlooked. The author shows how and why "second sexism is the neglected sexism, the sexism that is not taken seriously even by most of those who oppose (or at least claim that they oppose) sex discrimination" (p. 1). Thanks, first, to the early 20th-century suffragette movement and, more recently, to "third-wave," "ideological" or "partisan" (p. 14) feminism, we now recognize, acknowledge and are positioned to correct discrimination against boys and men that, it turns out, is part and parcel of the story of how life in community has become workable and developed in nearly every culture. Wherever there is manhood (which is ubiquitous, as we know from the work of anthropologist David Gilmore in his *Manhood in the Making*), there is anti-male sexism. And now, thanks to Professor Benatar, we have an incisive, comprehensive discussion of the phenomenon that feminism has unwittingly brought to the forefront.

Professor Benatar's work sheds penetrating light on the situation of boys and men, who

not only comprise the (to use Warren Farrell's term) "disposable sex" (as they always have) but now also (most notably within the last forty years and especially in liberal democracies) are the targets of misandry (systematic discrimination against males) and as such have come to constitute in our time the more neglected and harmed sex. The thesis of the book is "establishing that there is a second sexism" (p. 42). This Professor Benatar does. The author's goal is to compel us to take seriously the situation he has identified and clarifies with subtle, refined and fair arguments. There is no guarantee this will happen, although any reader capable of following Professor Benatar's arguments must rationally be compelled do so on the basis of his arguments. That such awareness has been lacking is cause for global shame. Professor Benatar makes clear the most important reasons for the lapse, which has not been accidental. That such discrimination has been justified and even valorized by the invocation of notions such as chivalry and heroism has only delayed awareness of male sexism.

David Benatar, who is professor and head of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Cape Town, accomplishes two things in his book, which if any integrity remains in academe is destined to have as wide a readership there as the 1949 volume by Simone de Beauvoir that Benatar's title echoes has had. First, he demonstrates that all but a handful of males are at a disadvantage in contemporary cultures and that they always have been. Second, he shows that in recent years the disadvantages to which boys and men are subject have been institutionalized as forms of wrongful discrimination on the basis of a non-essential feature of their being, namely, their sex.

With *The Second Sexism*, the area of gender studies has been liberated from the ideological grip of the social sciences and a field in academe known as cultural studies. Professor Benatar has also raised the theme of anti-male sexism to a level of discourse above the often self-apologetic pleadings of self-help advocates and pop social science where a number of efforts were made (beginning as early as the 1970s) to reveal the precarious situation in which boys and men find themselves. Moreover, the author reveals hidden presuppositions and distortions in widely read research that have been perpetuated since gender first became a topic of interest to scholars (other than grammarians) beginning around 1960 when the British sociologist Alec Comfort first used the term "gender" as a euphemism for sex.

The writing is jargon-free. As a philosopher, Professor Benatar is attentive to conceptual nuance and clear, precise usage. His background in analytic philosophy is evident. As an epistemologist, he examines with care and rigor the basic concepts of his topic. Above all, he foregrounds the ethical issues at stake in the discussion of gender in general and in particular in considerations of the second sexism. Professor Benatar has no interest in advocating an ideology and shows that from the start a certain ideology has been the hidden agenda of "gender studies" (which began as "women's studies"), even while objectivity in empirical research was claimed and promised by those publishing in the area.

The Second Sexism opens with an ominous caveat: "I am under no illusions. My position, no matter how clearly stated, is likely to be misunderstood" (p. 16). This is because Professor Benatar realizes that his most anxious and strident critics will be representatives of orthodoxies and, as such, will be driven by a kind of religious zeal of the sort that since the Middle Ages has endeavored to make philosophy the handmaiden of theology and, in turn, religious movements. Indeed, it can be claimed (although Professor Benatar does not do so) that especially third-wave feminism has the features of a religious movement. Substitute "political commitment" for "religious belief" and it becomes plausible that its devotees' strongly held beliefs and commitments displace and often ignore reasonable arguments adduced against their claims. The author's optimism and con-

confidence in what Freud famously called the “quiet voice” of reason will be attractive and energizing to those who are proponents of genuinely egalitarian values and harmony among human beings living in community and have wearied of the hectoring rhetoric of much of the material published as gender studies.

After making careful distinctions among disadvantage, discrimination, and wrongful discrimination, Professor Benatar defines sexism (which he acknowledges is a not unambiguous term) as “wrongful discrimination on the basis of sex” (p. 5) and states that “the really important conclusion for which I need to argue is that males are the victims of wrongful discrimination (or even merely wrongful treatment) on the basis of their sex” (p. 10). This is a sexism that “typically remains invisible” (p. 13) but is made visible in the pages of the present volume. It should go without saying that nothing Professor Benatar says in his book should be construed as “hostile to egalitarian feminism” (p. 14). “What I shall say,” he writes, “will be antagonistic only to partisan feminism” (p. 15), whose supporters “are interested only in advancing the interests and protecting the rights” of women (p. 14). Others have termed this “ideological feminism” (Paul Nathanson and Katherine Young in their path-breaking series of books on misandry) or “gender feminism” (Christina Hoff Sommers).

The first part (Chapter 2) of the book details “a range of disadvantages of being male” (p. 18), including conscription and being compelled to engage in combat, boys’ exposure to excessive violence (including excessive corporal punishment boys during the early childhood years), sexual assault at all ages, circumcision during infancy, practices recently introduced into school curricula (especially at the elementary level) that alienate boys, legal changes affecting family life (child custody conventions exercised by judges, decisions regarding paternity), social attitudes toward certain forms of private life (male homosexuality), violations of bodily privacy (especially in the criminal justice system and the military), the documented decrease in males’ life expectancy over the last century, and practices affecting terms of imprisonment of males and the greater frequency of capital punishment of men. Professor Benatar then (in Chapter 3) considers generally acknowledged and uncontested basic differences between the sexes and the effects of certain widely held general beliefs about males that have led to the disadvantages he enumerated in the first section of the book. In the most substantial section of his text (Chapter 4), Professor Benatar examines each of the examples of disadvantage presented in Chapter 2, tracing how they have been converted into forms of overt “wrongful discrimination.” In Chapter 5, the author responds to objections that have been raised to the evidence for male sexism he has presented. Considering in turn each area of disadvantage described (conscription and combat, violence, circumcision, education, sexual assault, bodily privacy, custody, life expectancy and imprisonment), he re-examines them in view of the “inversion,” “costs-of-dominance” and “distraction” arguments against his claims typically invoked by his critics. In the penultimate section, Chapter 6 of *The Second Sexism*, the author examines in contrast to equal opportunity initiatives “sex-based affirmative action,” arguing that “those affirmative action policies and practices that involve giving preference to people of a particular sex are not an appropriate response to sexism” (p. 19), whether it be of the first or second sort. In the concluding chapter, Professor Benatar begins by asking two sensitive questions: “Does feminism discriminate against men?” and “Are men worse off than women?” He responds to these highly charged questions with a view to the evidence he has provided throughout the book and he does so with evenhanded care (pp. 239-254). The book concludes with a justification for why the second sexism must be taken seriously and suggestions about how one might approach eliminating it.

To appreciate the importance of taking the second sexism seriously, readers might begin with the final pages of the concluding chapter (pp. 254-259). There they will see that with respect to male sexism to date, the starting point of the path from disadvantage to wrongful discrimination has been systematically obscured. We see, for example, that the glare of the social system of practices known as chivalry and the socially idealized mystique of self-sacrifice subsumed by the notion of heroism have blinded us to what these in general socially approved and encouraged attitudes (to which males are encouraged to aspire) have meant for most men's lives, namely, the sacrifice of real power, which is power over their own lives. In response to this section of the text, I was prompted to think of recent insults added to the injury of the lives of boys and men, including having stripped fatherhood of its dignity, considering boys to be inferior versions of girls, and failing to welcome young males to life on college and university campuses, the latter having led to discouraging young males from taking part in campus life, other than as athletes. Other readers will think of other issues, such as the emotional consequences of men's losing custody of their children. As Professor Benatar notes, until recently the custody of children went to fathers when a marriage was dissolved.

The Second Sexism develops ideas first presented in 2003 in an article published in an issue of the journal *Social Theory and Practice* that included four responses to Professor Benatar's thesis and his reply to them. As in his reply, the author here successfully answers the objections raised by his commentators there and by others (pp. 173-211). Of particular interest in the chapter on arguments leveled against him is a discussion of the "distraction argument," one that is frequently used by critics of the thesis of a second sexism. The distraction argument "clearly has a political agenda rather than philosophical agenda. It is more concerned about the political potency of recognizing the second sexism than about its philosophical status. Whatever one might think about the political duties of philosophers, these should certainly not override the philosophical tasks of honestly and accurately understanding the representing the issues, even if this is not politically convenient. Truth, and the philosophically sophisticated pursuit of it, should not be sacrificed in the name of a political cause" (pp. 201-202). Professor Benatar's admonition about the priority of the pursuit of truth over advocacy for a political cause must be taken seriously in academe in general and not only with reference to gender studies. Indeed, one major reason for considering this book to be of great importance is its intellectual provenance. It is a work of philosophy about a topic of general importance to all disciplines. It brings to bear on a set of pressing social issues a much to be desired perspective and methodology at a time when volume after volume of high-brow journalism pass themselves off as works of serious scholarship and when the term *research* has become a shibboleth for academics who in effect write only for each other and in confirmation of what they and their target audience have already accepted as givens—a sort of gender scholasticism. The life of the mind, by contrast, is about challenging claims, including one's own, by submitting them to critical scrutiny.

Quite a lot of space is devoted to conscription as an example of a social practice that has perennially put males at a disadvantage. Professor Benatar is unambiguous: "The disadvantages men suffer in being conscripted are the products of wrongful discrimination" (p. 102). He observes that apart from the ethical issues inherent in male-only conscription policies where they are in effect, "the use of gender stereotypes to pressure men into volunteering is also morally problematic. This is because such stereotypes go beyond whatever biological differences there might be between the sexes. They coerce men to do what they would otherwise not elect to do. After all, there would be no need to pressure men into enlisting and fighting if they would do it anyway" (p. 122).

It is nearly always overlooked that no matter what Hollywood might have suggested in the heyday of war movies (which were produced in order to bolster support for ongoing engagement in a war in which the United States was already involved and presumably to increase morale among the families and friends of soldiers already deployed and in combat), *most men* have no interest in fighting with each other. The discussions of men and combat are important parts of Professor Benatar's book (pp. 26-30 and 102-122) and are essential reading. The topic of conscription is, of course, closely related to that of the association of men and boys with violence in general (pp. 30-36 and 122-128). These sections of Professor Benatar's book are central to understanding the context of what he has to say in general about the disadvantages to which men are subjected and required by a code of masculinity to accept. The discussion of men and violence is put into perspective by Professor Benatar emending commonly held impressions about the extent to which men are victims of domestic violence (pp. 36-41, 132-134 and 185-186). There is a great deal of misinformation abroad about this topic and Professor Benatar is among those (including Murray Straus, whose work he cites) who are setting the record straight, for example, by presenting corrected data and revealing acknowledged errors of computation or interpretation in well-known publications and in the pronouncements of high-profile media figures in the entertainment industry, journalism and academe.

My enthusiasm for this work is based on the timeliness of its contribution to the discussion of boys and young men worldwide, but especially in Western liberal democracies (which are the focus but not the sole cultures examined by Professor Benatar) including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and most countries in the European Union. It is also based my appreciation of the nature and quality of the author's approach, which is philosophical. Finally, it should be noted that David Benatar's area of special competence is ethics. His discussion of the second sexism is decidedly one that exposes deep ethical concerns about the well-being of boys and men that we *must* not avoid addressing. Not to see that there are moral issues at stake here places those who either do not see or refuse to see that such is the case by default are in a position that requires them to show they are not themselves susceptible of being charged with holding an immoral position by ignoring what is patently the case. At the very least, such persons will have omitted to concern themselves with issues that demand the attention of anyone who is committed to justice.

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