

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

In *The Second Sexism* David Benatar takes on the question of discrimination against males in a preliminary yet scrupulous fashion. More precisely, the book makes a case for the very existence of discrimination against males, a problem that, as Benatar indicates, has been largely ignored and often flatly denied. The book is intended to demonstrate that discrimination against males is a legitimate problem worthy of both further research and, it is hoped, rectifying action. From the viewpoint of this reader, Benatar succeeds in this task admirably through strong argumentation, straightforward clarity, and attentiveness to opposing positions.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each of which deals with a set of issues related to the book's theme, discrimination against men and boys. The first chapter is introductory and outlines the structure and aim of the text and clarifies several preliminary issues. First, Benatar articulates what he means by "second sexism" (and sexism generally) as well as his own definition of wrongful discrimination, which he argues for in contrast to other conceptions of the notion. After noting that sometimes discrimination is acceptable and even desirable as a way of recognizing differences between things, he provides a formula for distinguishing *wrongful* discrimination, which occurs "when people are treated differently without there being a relevant difference between the people that justifies the differential treatment" (p. 4).

Benatar also offers a brief overview of the general positions that are taken on the theme of the book by giving an account of the broad categories these positions may fall into and their relation to his position. The two notable groups that would oppose Benatar's position are the so-called

partisan feminists, who seek to further the interests of women alone rather than equality between the sexes, and *gender-role conservatives*, who hold that men (and, presumably, women) *ought* to behave in a certain way and fit definite, established gender roles. The introductory chapter thus lays the foundation for the arguments that follow by both fixing the terms of the debate and identifying the primary positions to which Benatar is responding.

The second chapter catalogues a variety of the ways in which males are disadvantaged. This chapter does not yet discuss *discrimination*, but merely male disadvantage, leaving the arguments for cases of discrimination against males for a later chapter. Benatar is extensive in his presentation of male disadvantage, though not exhaustive. He limits his examples to clear and reasonably arguable cases of disadvantage, leaving out cases that may be more subtle or difficult to justify. Two of the most notable disadvantages that males experience are conscription and violence. With regard to the former, Benatar observes that throughout history it has been well nigh exclusively males who have fought wars and have been forced to do so by conscription. Where women are conscripted, Benatar argues, they are treated more leniently, most notably with regard to combat, of which males bear all or most of the burden. Second, Benatar demonstrates how males are much more likely to suffer violence *outside* of war. He notes that some studies indicate that twice as many men than women are victims of aggravated assault and more than three times as many men than women are murdered. He also dispels the claim that men are almost always the perpetrators of domestic violence, citing data that show women to be just as and, at times, *more* violent than men in domestic disputes. These are just a few of the disadvantages that Benatar presents in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 briefly treats the possible causes for male disadvantage and beliefs about the sexual differences of males. Benatar suggests that beliefs about males “partly explain why they are discriminated against.” However, he remarks, explaining why people do something is not the same as *justifying* it. On this point, Benatar draws attention to a distinction that is often neglected, that between instrumental and intrinsic value. The motive for raising this distinction is to combat the argument that women are more valuable due to their reproductive capabilities. Benatar notes that this is *instrumental* value, the value that something has when it is useful for a given end, such as the ‘survival of the species.’ Women may indeed be more valuable in *this* sense, but this does not amount to their being any more *intrinsically* valuable than males, for in all other significant respects males and females are, allowing for individual variation, more or less the same in their sentience, human capacities, and so on; that is, men and women are of equivalent *moral* worth. Benatar also distinguishes between *descriptive* beliefs and *normative* beliefs; that is, between beliefs about the way males *are* and beliefs about how they *should* be. After presenting some beliefs about males of both sorts and observing that there is often an overlap between the two, Benatar questions the truth of these beliefs, why they may or may not be true, and the implications of the answers to these questions. Among the issues addressed in this regard are the basis of sexual difference and the relation of biology and socialization (“nature-nurture”) as sources of sexual differences and beliefs about them.

Chapter 4 presents Benatar’s arguments for those cases in which disadvantage may be discriminatory and wrongfully so. This chapter makes up the heart of the book and contains the most salient points of Benatar’s argument. Each of the kinds of disadvantage presented in the second chapter is now taken up in the context of the question of discrimination. For each brand of disadvantage, Benatar makes the case that and to what degree its origins and practices are discriminatory. For example, picking up on the disadvantages of conscription and combat from Chapter 2, Benatar argues that these are in large part due to discrimination. He notes the assumption that when conscription is necessary, it is men who ought to be conscripted. Also, with or without conscription, men bear the bulk of combat burdens but, as Benatar later argues, these “burdens are distributed on the basis of sex” and their distribution to males alone, or nearly alone, is not justi-

fied (p. 103). To make his case, the author picks the strongest argument contrary to his position, articulates its essential points, and examines each of them at length. The argument cited is one by Kingsley Browne. Two of the main points of Browne's argument addressed by Benatar are the claim that men are more militarily effective and that sex may be used as a proxy for selecting militarily effective individuals. This is just a small portion of only one of the issues treated in this chapter. For the rest, Benatar responds to many popular views on the various sorts of male disadvantage held by both reputable scholars and many lay people in Western culture.

Benatar devotes the Chapter 5 to responding to objections to his arguments. To do this he outlines and replies to three common sorts of argument directed against his position. The first of these he calls the "inversion" argument, wherein discrimination against males is "inverted" to look like discrimination against females. Second, he presents the "costs-of-dominance" argument, which claims that male disadvantage is due to the supposed dominance of men. Lastly, there is the "distraction" argument, which holds that giving attention to discrimination against males will distract attention from the supposedly more serious discrimination against females. A final possible objection may be raised against the definitions that Benatar gives of sexism and discrimination. Benatar responds to this sort of objection at length, arguing both for his definitions and against competing definitions.

Chapter 6 is a reply to the question of affirmative action and its legitimacy as a method for rectifying the injustices of discrimination. Benatar is careful to clarify that he is here concerned principally with *sex-based* affirmative action and does not address the problem with regard to race or any other context. Benatar argues *against* sex-based affirmative action and does this by responding to several common arguments for such. These fall into two general categories, one based on the rectification of past injustice and the other on the rectification of present discrimination. The former seeks to compensate currently living individuals of a disadvantaged group in the present for sufferings of *other* individuals of that group that occurred in the past. Benatar notes that compensation is due to the *sufferer* rather than to another person who happens to be classed within the same group. The latter argument holds that where a group is still disadvantaged affirmative action must be employed to rectify the current imbalance. However, Benatar argues, in the case of sex-based discrimination against women that is supposed to justify affirmative action for women there are often unfounded inferences and conclusions. One such inference is that where there is a statistical disparity, there is necessarily discrimination. However, much of the time, at least in Western liberal democracies, women are not in fact being discriminated against in the areas in which they are claimed to be. Benatar takes on this problem on at length, presenting a variety of cases and possible explanations *other than* discrimination, and suggests correcting these rather than applying affirmative action. It must also be remarked that Benatar does not support affirmative action for *either sex*, as he holds it to be an overall improper method for rectifying discrimination, at least in its sex-based forms.

The final chapter serves as a conclusion that summarizes Benatar's position and raises some questions about a few related issues. Two of these issues are the questions of whether or not feminism discriminates against men and whether men are worse off than women. To the first Benatar answers that feminism does not *cause* discrimination against males, though in some cases it may exacerbate it. To the second question, Benatar answers that although it is difficult to tell which sex is worse off, the determination of such a matter is not essential either to his argument or to acting to rectify discrimination. Rather, he suggests that issues of discrimination against both sexes be addressed in any case, regardless of who 'has it worse.' That is, unfair or unjust discrimination remains so independently of comparative claims, just as the fact that when one person suffers less (if such can be determined) than another, that person still suffers and should be given appropriate aid. In closing, Benatar emphasizes the need to take the second sexism seriously and calls for more research into male disadvantage and corresponding discrimination, as well as ap-

appropriate action to redress the problems derived from such discrimination.

Overall the book stands strong in its arguments while maintaining a spirit of scholarship and debate. It is striking how honest and straightforward Benatar is in his assessments and arguments. He pulls no punches, presenting the data he has uncovered and arguing clearly for his position. A distinguishing feature of the book is its clarity. Benatar goes to lengths on many occasions to clarify precisely what he is and is not saying and the reasons for doing so. He also takes the time to define the terms essential to his argument *and* to argue for their legitimacy. Moreover, in contrast to many of his opponents, Benatar applies his principles, assumptions, and definitions both to himself and others without bias, lending his work the additional merit of consistency. From a formal standpoint the work is clear and sound, while remaining humble and open to criticism.

That said, Benatar spares no expense to show just how faulty the arguments of his opponents are. In his arguments against contrary positions, Benatar unveils them as anything from mistaken and misleading to downright ridiculous. One of the milder cases in which another position is at least misleading is that of a study by Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze. Benatar reveals that their argument is a “sophisticated form of the view that lost female lives are more noteworthy than lost male lives” (p. 191). He does this by illustrating that their claims about the excess of “missing women” are based on an arbitrarily set baseline for the female-male ratio. Benatar observes that this baseline is not in fact based on birth ratios but on additional qualifications that conceal a tacit normative claim that there *should* be a higher ratio of females to males. The ratio set by Sen and Drèze may be reversed to show more missing *males* depending on how one chooses to represent the data. Moreover, in either case, he observes, the ratios are just that and do not provide us with absolute numbers and so may deceive us about how many missing men *or* women there may be in a given country.

In the case of both the milder and more extreme deficiencies of other positions Benatar maintains scholarly clarity and consistency. However, at times his arguments do fall short of being exhaustive. He admits that for better or worse, his arguments are limited only to those essential to making the case for the fact of discrimination against males and, as such, do not go into a full analysis of all the data or opposing positions. It is also not uncommon to find Benatar forced to admit a lack of evidence to support stronger claims that he might like to make. For instance, in the context of domestic violence, Benatar must admit that there are not enough data to support the claim of some of his opponents that wives “almost never” stalk their husbands. At the same time this also prevents Benatar from being able to claim the contrary and say that or how much wives do stalk their husbands. While it is unfortunate that information is sometimes lacking, Benatar draws attention to this and owns up to his and others’ inability to make certain claims. A general example of this occurs towards the end of the book, where Benatar draws attention to the lack of research on the second sexism, which makes it difficult to know or make claims about the precise extent or manner in which it is manifested.

A recurring issue both in his opponents’ positions and also in some of the concrete manifestations of the second sexism is *inconsistency*. From the fourth chapter on the radical inconsistencies and one-sided biases of courts, legislation, feminists and others become so apparent that it is almost becomes tedious to continue reading. One almost is compelled to say, “Here too? Give me a break!” For instance, Benatar draws attention to the ridiculous claim that the courts’ leniency towards women in sentencing is due to the fact that “male hegemony would be threatened because unpaid family labor performed by females would be eliminated” (p. 193). Benatar observes that even if this is at all true such labor would not be eliminated but only marginally reduced. Moreover, he notes the absurdity in thinking “hegemonic white males’ would prefer to avoid this marginal reduction in unpaid family work to a comparable reduction in their *own* chances of being incarcerated” (p. 194). In other words, this ridiculous belief amounts to saying that males feel that losing someone to make sandwiches and wash the carpet is *worse* than incarceration.

“Hegemonic males” truly must be a stubborn bunch, choosing rather to suffer incarceration and its attendant disadvantages than to give up the domestic “power” of having a “domestic laborer,” if such exist at all.

One of the more notable ways in which Benatar reveals inconsistencies in some positions is by attempting to apply their assumptions and principles to the case of male disadvantaging. When this is done, it often becomes immediately apparent that most feminists, at least, would reject the reversal in a heartbeat if it disadvantaged women. However, where the application of such a principle or belief disadvantages males unfairly, it is not even worthy of mention. A notable example of this is Benatar’s observation that “many defenders of affirmative action are not satisfied unless men and women are roughly equally represented – in desirable positions, that is. They treat the mere differential as evidence of discrimination, yet they make no such inference when the differential favors women” (p. 228). Along with other, similar instances, Benatar makes it clear that bias and inconsistency are highly prevalent in some areas and with some groups of people. Despite his exposure of such glaring inconsistencies, Benatar maintains the rigor of argumentation without giving way to baseless claims, generalizations, or childish mudslinging. This abstention only lends more credence to his arguments, for he is not only arguing soundly, but also being philosophically rigorous throughout his demonstration.

Taking account of the book’s merits, there still remain some problem areas. One of these, touched on above, is the lack of information in many areas that makes arguing either for or against Benatar’s position difficult on some finer points. This becomes most apparent in his discussion of the nature vs. socialization debate, where he admits that “answers to this question must be very general... because we lack sufficient knowledge to determine with any precision what the relative roles and interactions are [between socialization and nature]” (p. 96). This simply indicates a need for more research on the issues (p. 259).

Benatar provides a brief discussion of sexual difference, observing biological differences and granting that there are or may be psychological differences between the sexes. However, his conclusions are fairly vague and may be summed up as saying, “men and women are not that different.” This conclusion is not in itself problematic or necessarily incorrect, but the issue is not treated in depth within the text, despite its significance for the problems at hand. The issue is highly significant for Benatar’s argument, however, since it is essential for determining what may be considered discrimination and whether such is wrongful or not.

Another set of unquestioned assumptions are *moral*. The clearest instance of this is Benatar’s endorsement of what he calls “egalitarian feminism,” which is concerned with the equality of the sexes. This may well be worthy of concern, however it is not clear why this is so. Benatar makes claims throughout the book that suggest how things *ought* to be with regard to sexual equality that are, presumably, founded upon this basic moral position. The reasons for such an ‘ought’ are left undisclosed and not discussed, perhaps due to the lack of novelty of the imperative towards equality. While I generally agree with his positions on such matters, for instance the imperative toward equality between the sexes rather than the advancement of a one-sided agenda, these positions are not themselves argued for in any detail.

One final critical remark is in order. Given the focus of the book on the problem of *discrimination*, the phenomenon of discrimination as such is not dealt with extensively and is relegated to a problem of definition. While Benatar does present a reasonable definition and argue for it, it is unclear precisely how discrimination becomes as prevalent and, at times, systemic as seems to be the case. Benatar suggests that “[s]ex discrimination is not simply about what individuals do. It can also be the product of systems and structures” (p. 133). Again, this may be so, but it is unclear precisely how a *system* may favor one sex over another. Discrimination seems to be something that is enacted by human beings, not by inhuman things such as systems, unless we are comfortable suggesting that computers discriminate between os and is. If so, it is not clear if the

phenomenon of discrimination is the same for humans as it is for computers or systems generally. This begs the question of precisely what it means to “discriminate.”

Benatar’s extended argument for his definition of discrimination in Chapter 5, compelling though it is, remains a problem of terminology rather than one of the phenomenon of discrimination as such. In his criticisms of other definitions what seems to be at stake is setting the criteria for calling a particular occurrence an act of “discrimination.” The amount of controversy over the definition of the term indicates a general scholarly lack of clarity about any “real” occurrence and gives the impression that discrimination is a word subject to arbitrary meanings then fitted as a label onto actual occurrences that conform to the chosen meaning. Discrimination as a phenomenon, event, or act remains undetermined and Benatar’s discussion of “discrimination” as such is left to a matter of terms. His definition impacts the rest of his argument as it delineates what may and may not qualify for the title of “discrimination” and so determines what may or may not count as discrimination against males. As I have said, I see no problem with his definition itself, although the very question of definition is, at least here, somewhat abstract and removed from actual events and relegated to a matter of mere scholarly debate. Perhaps this is not relevant since the aim of the book is only to demonstrate the existence of discrimination against males as it has been defined.

On the whole, I am now convinced that there is discrimination against males and that the second sexism is a legitimate problem worthy of attention. Benatar has done good and sound work on a topic that has been little explored thus far. If readers can approach Benatar’s work with an appropriately open and reasonable mind, the book may be a great aid in bringing to light a pressing and important problem. *The Second Sexism* is a strong and early step on the way to the awareness, amelioration, and treatment of a widespread and unaddressed problem that affects a not insignificant portion of the human population.

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