Democracy Dies in Darkness

The fixation on men behaving badly distracts from more fundamental issues.

Feminists treat men badly. It's bad for feminism.

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Feminist male-bashing has come to sound like a cliche — a misogynist caricature. Feminism, its loudest proponents vow, is about fighting for equality. The man-hating label is either a smear or a misunderstanding. Yet a lot of feminist rhetoric today does cross the line from attacks on sexism into attacks on men, with a strong focus on personal behavior: the way they talk, the way they approach relationships, even the way they sit on public transit. Male faults are stated as sweeping condemnations; objecting to such

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generalizations is taken as a sign of complicity. Meanwhile, similar indictments of women would be considered grossly misogynistic. This gender antagonism does nothing to advance the unfinished business of equality. If anything, the fixation on men behaving badly is a distraction from more fundamental issues, such as changes in the workplace to promote work-life balance. What's more, male-bashing not only sours many men — and

quite a few women — on feminism. It often drives them into Internet subcultures where critiques of feminism mix with hostility toward women. AD

* * * To some extent, the challenge to men and male power has always been inherent in feminism, from the

time the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments catalogued the grievances of "woman" against

Feminine Mystique," which sparked the great feminist revival of the 1960s, Betty Friedan saw men not

as villains but as fellow victims burdened by societal pressures and by the expectations of their wives,

That began to change in the 1970s with the rise of radical feminism. This movement, with its slogan,

"The personal is political," brought a wave of female anger at men's collective and individual

"man." However, these grievances were directed more at institutions than at individuals. In "The

transgressions. Authors like Andrea Dworkin and Marilyn French depicted ordinary men as patriarchy's brutal foot soldiers. AD

who depended on them for both livelihood and identity.

against white males is not racist or sexist, since it is not directed at the oppressed) and then deplored in an article titled "Dear Men: This Is Why Women Have Every Right To Be Disgusted With Us." Whatever the reasons for the current cycle of misandry — yes, that's a word, derided but also adopted for ironic use by many feminists — its existence is quite real. Consider, for example, the number of neologisms that use "man" as a derogatory prefix and that have entered everyday media language: "mansplaining," "manspreading" and "manterrupting." Are these primarily male behaviors that justify the gender-specific terms? Not necessarily: The study that is cited as evidence of excessive male interruption of women actually found that the most frequent interrupting is female-on-female ("femterrupting"?). Sitting with legs apart may be a guy thing, but there is plenty of visual documentation of women

hogging extra space on public transit with purses, shopping bags and feet on seats. As for

"mansplaining," these days it seems to mean little more than a man making an argument a woman

dislikes. Slate correspondent Dahlia Lithwick has admitted using the term to "dismiss anything said by

men" in debates about Hillary Clinton. And the day after Clinton claimed the Democratic presidential

observation that it's a measure of our country's "great progress" that "many younger women find the

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nomination, political analyst David Axelrod was slammed as a "mansplainer" on Twitter for his

nomination of a woman unremarkable."

This tendency has reached a troubling new peak, as radical feminist theories that view modern Western

narratives and its addiction to outrage. We live in a time when jerky male attempts at cyber-flirting can

civilization as a patriarchy have migrated from academic and activist fringes into mainstream

conversation. One reason for this trend is social media, with its instant amplification of personal

be collected on a blog called Straight White Boys Texting (which carries a disclaimer that prejudice

generally relegated to the seedy underbelly of the Internet — various forums and websites in the "manosphere," recently chronicled by Stephen Marche in the Guardian. Yet a leading voice of the new feminist generation, British writer Laurie Penny, can use her column in the New Statesman to decry exboyfriends who "turned mean or walked away" and to urge straight young women to stay single instead of "wasting years in succession on lacklustre, unappreciative, boring child-men." Feminist commentary routinely puts the nastiest possible spin on male behavior and motives. Consider the backlash against the concept of the "friend zone," or being relegated to "friends-only" status when seeking a romantic relationship — usually, though not exclusively, in reference to men being "friend zoned" by women. Since the term has a clear negative connotation, feminist critics say it reflects the

assumption that a man is owed sex as a reward for treating a woman well. Yet it's at least as likely that,

as feminist writer Rachel Hills argued in a rare dissent in the Atlantic, the lament of the "friend zoned"

Things have gotten to a point where casual low-level male-bashing is a constant white noise in the hip

progressive online media. Take a recent piece on Broadly, the women's section of Vice, titled, "Men Are

Creepy, New Study Confirms" — promoted with a Vice Facebook post that said: "Are you a man? You're

probably a creep." The actual study found something very different: that both men and women

overwhelmingly think someone described as "creepy" is more likely to be male. If a study had found

that a negative trait was widely associated with women (or gays or Muslims), surely this would have

is about "loneliness and romantic frustration," not sexual entitlement.

Men who gripe about their ex-girlfriends and advise other men to avoid relationships with women are

been reported as deplorable stereotyping, not confirmation of reality. AD

Meanwhile, men can get raked over the (virtual) coals for voicing even the mildest unpopular opinion

Video Game Nerd," was <u>roundly vilified</u> as a misogynistic "man-baby" in social media and the online

he felt was its failure to acknowledge the original franchise.

on something feminism-related. Just recently, YouTube film reviewer James Rolfe, who goes by "Angry

press after announcing that he would not watch the female-led "Ghostbusters" remake because of what

This matters, and not just because it can make men less sympathetic to the problems women face. At a

time when we constantly hear that womanpower is triumphant and "the end of men" — or at least of

traditional manhood — is nigh, men face some real problems of their own. Women are now earning

since 1994, even as female enrollment has risen from 63 percent to 71 percent. Predominantly male

about 60 percent of college degrees; male college enrollment after high school has stalled at 61 percent

blue-collar jobs are on the decline, and the rise of single motherhood has left many men disconnected from family life. The old model of marriage and fatherhood has been declared obsolete, but new ideals remain elusive.

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Perhaps mocking and berating men is not the way to show that the feminist revolution is about equality

and that they have a stake in the new game. The message that feminism can help men, too — by placing

misandry" often seems entirely non-ironic and who has angrily insisted that feminism stands only for

equal value on their role as parents or by encouraging better mental health care and reducing male

women. Gibes about "male tears" — for instance, on a T-shirt sported by writer Jessica Valenti in a

challenging the stereotype of the stoic, pain-suppressing male. Dismissing concerns about wrongful

movement for gender equality is to listen to women and patiently endure anti-male slams is not the best

Valenti and others argue that man-hating cannot do any real damage because men have the power and

privilege. Few would deny the historical reality of male dominance. But today, when men can lose their

accusations of rape with a snarky "What about the menz" is not a great way to show that women's

liberation does not infringe on men's civil rights. And telling men that their proper role in the

way to win support.

role, too.

photo taunting her detractors — seem particularly unfortunate if feminists are serious about

suicide — is undercut by gender warriors like Australian pundit Clementine Ford, whose "ironic

jobs because of sexist missteps and be expelled from college over allegations of sexual misconduct, that's a blinkered view, particularly since the war on male sins can often target individuals' trivial transgressions. Take the media shaming of former "Harry Potter" podcaster Benjamin Schoen, pilloried for some mildly obnoxious tweets (and then an insufficiently gracious email apology) to a woman who had blocked him on Facebook after an attempt at flirting. While sexist verbal abuse toward women online is widely deplored, there is little sympathy for men who are attacked as misogynists, mocked as "man-babies" or "angry virgins," or even smeared as sexual predators in Internet disputes. We are headed into an election with what is likely to be a nearly unprecedented gender gap among voters. To some extent, these numbers reflect policy differences. Yet it is not too far-fetched to see the pro-Donald Trump sentiment as fueled, at least in part, by a backlash against feminism. And while some of this backlash may be of the old-fashioned "put women in their place" variety, there is little doubt that for the younger generation, the perception of feminism as extremist and anti-male plays a

This theme emerged in Conor Friedersdorf's recent interview in the Atlantic with a Trump supporter, a college-educated, 22-year-old resident of San Francisco who considers himself a feminist and expects his career to take a back seat to that of his higher-earning fiancee — but who also complains about being "shamed" as a white man and voices concern about false accusations of rape. As this campaign shows, our fractured culture is badly in need of healing — from the gender wars as well as other divisions. To be a part of this healing, feminism must include men, not just as supportive allies but as partners, with an equal voice and equal humanity.

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