What Do Men Find Threatening about Women's Empowerment?

Agnes Callard

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Hilary Clinton faced a distinctive kind of obstacle in her quest for the presidency: she was behaving like the "wrong kind" of woman. To pick just one example, the psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett has argued that people were inclined to perceive Hilary's failures to smile differently from her competitors': "A woman making stern-looking facial movements must be angry or upset. A man who looks the same, on the other hand, is focusing on the important matters at hand."[1] Kate Manne studies this kind of obstacle and dissects it into two components—sexism and misogyny—in her important new book, *Down Girl*.

Manne's guiding model for describing sexism is as an unfair commercial interaction, an "uneven, gendered economy of giving and taking moral-cum-social goods and services" (107). Her thought is that such an arrangement constitutes a "patriarchal division of labor" (79) in which women have the role of "giving" attention, care, nurture, and affection, whereas men are entitled to "take" these things from them. Manne contrasts a world ordered in this patriarchal way with one in which everyone has "equal moral purchase" (70). She regularly refers to the sexist structure as one in which "she gives" and "he takes."

Manne understands misogyny as the enforcement mechanism for this interaction: it is a way of extracting what women are perceived to owe men. Manne does not spell out why women might be unwilling to give what they "owe," but presumably the inequity at the heart of the arrangement is what leads women to want out of it.

Thus she describes misogyny as the "law enforcement branch of the patriarchal order." Misogyny, in Manne's new construal of the term, serves to describe social practices of treating women differentially based on their willingness or unwillingness to cleave to the "giver" role: the former being rewarded, the latter sanctioned.

I want to begin by raising some doubts about both the intelligibility and the usefulness of this particular economic framing of male-female interaction. There is a large literature in economics analyzing interpersonal relationships in economic terms.[2] Unlike Manne, these models tend to presuppose that goods are given and exchanged on both sides; indeed, that is arguably criterial on an economic analysis of an exchange. Even in exploitative exchanges the disadvantaged party is conceived of as securing goods at too high a cost, rather than as bearing only costs, with no goods to show for the expenditure.

Manne does not explicitly deny that goods flow in the reverse direction—from men to women—but her recurrent framing of the arrangement as one in which "he gives" and "she takes" suggests this interpretation. There is only one place in which she gestures at goods provided by men to women—she lists money, chivalry, respect—but she describes these as "goods or services that *he once* might have provided" (112, italics mine). The traditional conception of the role of men assigns to them the job of

[1] "Hillary Clinton's 'Angry' Face." *New York Times*, September 23, 2016. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/ opinion/sunday/hillary-clintons-angry-face.html.

[2] The locus classicus for the familial relationship is Gary S. Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

providing for women and protecting them against external dangers, but Manne seems to see this "male part" of the division of labor as outdated.

Finally, consider her classification of what she calls "malecoded goods"—"social positions of leadership, authority, influence, money and other forms of power, as well as social status, prestige, rank, and the markers thereof" (113). She sees these as yet more goods for men to take "from women," in the sense that women are misogynistically sanctioned for competing for them. Traditionally, those sanctions would themselves be underwritten by the fact that these goods are connected to men's fulfillment of their part of the bargain—providing and protecting—but on Manne's conception, they become free-floating goods by which men attain a kind of self-actualization to which women have only restricted access. Once again, men get something for nothing.

My concern, then, is that Manne's conceptual apparatus for elucidating sexism and misogyny is unhelpfully hyperbolic. For consider relationships in which there are, in fact, norms dictating only what one party owes. We find non-reciprocal normative regulations—in which one side is morally obligated to "give" and the other side may "take" without facing any sort of sanction—structuring the relationships between human beings and their pets, or their infant children. It is an interesting feature of explanatory accounts of misogyny that they tend to be emasculating—accusing men who mistreat women specifically of *weakness* and *impotence*—but it is possible to take such rhetoric too far. Assimilating men to pets and infants would, I think, constitute an excess of classificatory vengeance.

Should we, perhaps, consider a weakened version of the "she gives/he takes" structure, in which women give *more than* they take? A somewhat less extreme picture of the iniquity of the interaction provides a better starting point for an analysis of sexism as a form of exploitation, and misogyny as the violence required for keeping an exploitative exchange in place. (And Manne does, in one place, specifically describe the interaction as one of exploitation (209).)

But consider how that story would go. Manne's view that men "used to" give women goods of protection, respect, and chivalry would have to be modified to the view that they used to give *more* of those goods than they now do. Perhaps she would refer to the loosening of gender norms to which the entry of women into the workforce corresponds, and the fact the movement has been in one direction rather than the other—women readily took to wearing pants, whereas very few men want to wear dresses. There is some indication that she is inclined to frame the historical account this way, since she does say that the goods women provide have become "scarce resources." But consider what this story entails: the world used to be less sexist than it is. Back when men did their jobs, and women did theirs, was there a *more* equal exchange and a *less* exploitative relationship? This seems unlikely. Before women joined the labor force, it seems they were subject to far more of what we might traditionally call domination.

This points, I think, to the limits of even a more temperate version of the economic model as the primary mode of expressing what is unjust about sexism. Carol Pateman, whom Manne references in her discussion of patriarchy, contrasts an economic critique

of it as "exploitation . . . in the technical Marxist sense of the extraction of surplus value" with an approach by way of contract theory. The latter "directs attention to the creation of relations of domination and subordination." The two critiques are not mutually exclusive, since each accepts the terminology of the other as descriptive of the phenomenon—the economic critique conceives of the exploitation in question as an instance of domination, and the political critique conceives of the domination in question as exploitative. Nonetheless, it is relevant that the directions of explanation differ, and Pateman sees her project as that of exposing contractual injustice as the underlying cause of inequity: "exploitation is possible precisely because, as I shall show, contracts about property in the person place right of command in the hands of one-party to the contract."[3]

Manne's heavy use of the language of economic imbalance suggests that she favors the other direction of explanation. But perhaps her descriptions of "giving" and "taking" are meant to be rhetorical rather than explanatory. If that were the case, it would be necessary to articulate what lay beneath these ways of talking. The answer could well be something like the relations of command and obedience described by Pateman. Alternatively, Manne might think that relations of command and obedience follow from the more basic fact of exploitation. I do not think Manne comes down clearly on this question of priority, so I want to spend a minute explaining why it is such an important one.

Consider the example Manne uses to illustrate male entitlement. She asks us to imagine sitting down at a restaurant and not being served—all the while one can see the server "lounging around lazily or just doing her own thing" (50). Or perhaps she is serving everyone *but* you. In this circumstance, you might eventually explode with anger and frustration. Manne's thought is that this consideration of this schematic example could help us model the rage some men feel when they do not receive what they expect from women.

The question is, what is making the restaurant goer so angry? There are two interpretations of the schema: it could be that he is angry at not getting the food and attention he was expecting, or he could be angry about being disobeyed. Unpacking the analogy, do men want certain goods that they have come to expect that they can receive from women, where the characteristic means by which they receive these goods is through command, or do they want to be able to command women, where the characteristic form that such command takes is the demand for a particular set of goods? In both cases, the anger will encompass both the goods and the subordination, but I think it is important to ask which of the two is fundamental. It is one thing to think that the customer is "banging his spoon on the table" because the absence of food symbolizes the insubordination of the server, and another to think that he bangs it because he's hungry.

[3] Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988). All quotations from page 8.

There are, then, two distinct ways of analyzing the mechanism of sexism and misogyny:

> (1) You can approach it *economically*, as an injustice with respect to the equitable distribution of goods and labor.
>
> (2) You can approach it *politically,* as an injustice concerning the manner in which the agency of one person is coordinated with or subordinated to that of another.

In the remainder of this essay, I want to make a case for the explanatory fruitfulness of the latter as opposed to the former approach.

I. Masculine-coded Goods

Consider what Manne calls "masculine-coded goods" such as "social positions of leadership, authority, influence, money and other forms of power, as well as social status, prestige, rank, and the markers thereof" (113). The economic exploitation account asserts that men are simply unwilling to give up a set of goods they have been accustomed to—or, more accurately, unwilling to lower their chances of getting those goods by allowing an increase in the size of the group competing for them. But if I orient myself by way of Manne's examples, the men who seem most upset at women winning these goods are precisely those men who would be unsuccessful in competing for them in any case. Women aren't "taking anything" away from them that another man wouldn't have stepped in to take. (If Hilary Clinton loses the presidency, that doesn't mean you will win it.)

If one's desire is, in the first instance, for the object itself, one doesn't care who one loses it to; if, by contrast, men aim not so much to attain the goods but to prevent women from having them, that suggests the political model. The political model of sexism analyzes the resistance women face competing for wealth, honor, and authority as an issue of domination. But how, exactly? Let me sketch one account of how that analysis might go, admitting that what I present here should be taken as a hypothesis or suggestion.

If a good is competitive—which is to say, zero-sum—then much engagement with it is characterized by the experience of failure. In the workplace, everyone is dominated by someone, since you can always find the person who has more power, authority, and wealth than you do. If the home was traditionally a place where a man could expect to be dominant—he commands, his wife and children obey—it would have constituted a kind of antidote to the psychological trauma wreaked by a day of immersion in a competitive culture in which one inevitably came out some kind of loser.

The entrance of women into the workplace threatens to turn the home from a haven—the one place where a man was assured of a "win"—into yet another competitive space. In support of this interpretation, consider the research of Christin L.

Munsch, showing that men who earn less money than their wives are more likely to have extramarital affairs.[4] Munsch hypothesizes that such affairs constitute an attempt to compensate for economic dependency on their wives. To put the point in the terms above, we can hypothesize that such men are looking for an alternative "haven."

Consider, also, Munsch's overview of the literature in this field:

> Men still regard providing as their responsibility even if they welcome their partner's contributions (Townsend 2002), couples with similar wages tend to interpret women's earnings as supplemental (Potuchek 1997), and husbands of high-earning women report increasing their work hours to maintain primary-earner status (Deutsch and Saxon 1998). Conversely, breadwinning wives downplay their financial contributions, defer to their husbands in decision making (Meisenbach 2010; Tichenor 2005), and do a disproportionate amount of housework (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994; Evertsson and Nermo 2004; Greenstein 2000; Tichenor 2005)[5]

Given that most men are not in direct workplace competition with their wives for money, honor, or authority, the political explanation seems more credible than the economic one here. More specifically, it seems plausible that seeing women as competitors represents a loss of one's defense against the noxious features of the competitive environment—a loss that threatens the psychological possibility of engaging in the forms of competition on which not only manliness but also survival depends.

II. Feminine-coded Goods

Let us, now, turn to what Manne calls "feminine-coded goods." I believe that Manne is right to call the condemnation of women who seek to avoid motherhood "misogyny." She observes that a deep undercurrent of antipathy seems to be based on the thought that a woman is "failing to nurture, refusing to give life or to care for the vulnerable" (100). Why is the fact that a woman won't nurture—especially if you aren't seeking for her to nurture *you* in particular—such a threatening prospect?

Manne is surely right to notice that nurture, affection, and care are genuinely good, but it is remarkable that those men who are most angered by women's failing to provide them—in the quote above, Manne is referring to an incident involving Rush Limbaugh—do not seem to be the ones who most highly value those goods. I want to make a suggestion about the political motivation that might underlie what sounds like an economic demand for women's "services."

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* describes a totalitarian takeover in which the (relatively few) fertile women in a society become pregnancy-slaves to

[4] Christin L. Munsch, "Her Support, His Support: Money, Masculinity, and Marital Infidelity," *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 3 (2015): 469–95.

[5] Ibid., 470.

the wealthy and powerful. I want to propose that what Atwood describes is a version of the panic that underwrites the motherhood-enforcement branch of misogyny, but writ large. The panic in question is that of having one's extinction held hostage to the whims and choices of women. If women can choose whether or not they want children—in the form of birth control and abortion—then men's ability to reproduce depends on the will of women.

And there is, in turn, reason to think that the ability to reproduce—perhaps not necessarily at the individual level, but at least at the level of one's social group or cultural cohort—is deeply connected to a sense of one's own life as meaningful and one's death as bearable. So Samuel Scheffler argued in his book, *Death and the Afterlife,*[6] contending that a belief in the existence of future generations underwrites the ways in which human beings, as a matter of contingent fact, engage in the various valuing-practices that are central to the meaning of our lives. He shows that every arena of valuing, from close, personal relationships, to intellectual and aesthetic engagement, to the pursuit of humanitarian goals, is more affected than you might have predicted by the prospect of being cut off from the human beings who might inherit those values.

Consider the following thought experiment: Suppose it were simply a biological fact that a man dies if he does not have sex with a woman before the age of twenty, and that such sex were consequently seen as a right, enforceable by law. One day, however, the society wakes up to the immorality of this arrangement and lifts the requirement that women supply life-saving sex. Men would react with panic, desperation, and perhaps also—and this is the crucial point—a certain level of resentment at the power women hold over them. One's life is now literally in the hands of the woman who will consent to have sex with one.

Of course, we are not in such a life-or-death scenario, nor do we face a dire infertility crisis such as that in *The Handmaid's Tale*. But the connection between extreme sexism and misogyny, on the one hand, and the threat of such a crisis, on the other, is a telling one. Women's power to control the future represents a form of domination even those men disinclined to place much value on the work of nurturing and caregiving experience as deeply, perhaps even existentially, threatening. In pushing back against this threat, men may be resisting what they experience as a profound form of domination.

I have tried to articulate a way in which women's increased power with respect to income and reproductive choices could be experienced, by men, as an existential threat. I hope thereby to have illustrated the explanatory power of the political model of sexism. With respect to male-coded goods, if competition for these goods is constitutive of maleness, but predicated on the now uncertain cooperation of women, then women threaten men with non-being—which is to say, not being able to be what they are. And with respect to the female-coded goods, if they become truly the province of women to give or withhold, then women have control over the future on which (women's and) men's valuations depend. The desire of men to dominate women is not, on this picture,

[6] Samuel Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

so different from the desire of Achilles to dominate Hector, or, more generally, the desire of the Greeks to dominate the Trojans—it traces not to greed but to fear, the alternative being not only defeat but that deep sort of annihilation in which even memory is "blotted out" (*Iliad* XII l.85, XIII, l.270, XIV, l.85).

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