

Short Takes: Reflections on Andi Zeisler's *We Were Feminists Once*

We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement. By Andi Zeisler. New York: Public Affairs, 2016.

Marketplace Feminism: About the Menz

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In her new book, *We Were Feminists Once*, Andi Zeisler writes about what she dubs “marketplace feminism,” a powerful, corporatized, depoliticized version of feminism that’s developed during the past twenty years. As she documents, entire industries continue to appropriate the language and imagery of culture-challenging activism to create what are, in the end, superficial and ultimately conservative narratives of self-actualization. The pop culture that she describes, one that, as a founder of *Bitch* magazine, she herself had great hopes of leveraging to raise feminist consciousness, has done an excellent job of lulling people, especially women, into thinking that feminism is fun and games, unnecessary, harmful, or reduced to personal choices. In any case, the world is, by these estimations, largely represented in media as “postfeminist”—the word with perhaps the longest index entry in the book.

Zeisler’s analysis comes at a particularly consequential time in terms of how feminism and gender relations are portrayed and perceived: it was published during the first presidential election in which a woman was a major party candidate and during a race that was defined by identity issues. Zeisler’s analysis focuses on women and the effects of marketplace feminism’s messages on collective and political sensibilities. However, what this election demonstrated vividly is that if marketplace feminism sold women a bill of goods, it simultaneously appears to have utterly bankrupted men.

Marketplace feminism has, in fact, depending on who it’s being sold to, also been marketplace antifeminism. A recent Pew Research Center study re-

vealed that more than half (56 percent) of American men surveyed think sexism has been eradicated in the United States (Fingerhut 2016). Sixty-three percent of American women say sexism still generates meaningful obstacles in their lives, while only 41 percent of men believe that women face gender-based problems that make it harder for them to succeed.

Bathed from birth in hypergendered and segmented media of every stripe, millennials have one of the biggest gender gaps in understanding feminism and sexism among any demographic cohort: 63 percent of millennial women think sexism is real and demands institutional responses compared to only 38 percent of men.

Studies show that both teenage boys and girls, as well as people in their twenties, go out of their way to portray sexism as equally affecting men and women—a marker of the strange kind of “equality” that is a hallmark of marketplace feminism, which has everything to do with the fact that terms like “reverse sexism” and “reverse racism” aren’t automatically dismissed by most people as incoherent blatherings. Boys and young men today routinely underestimate their female peers (Bach 2016), are less likely to think women can be engineers or leaders (Kramer and Harris 2016), and often believe that women are, in fact, oppressing them. Sixty-eight percent of women who grew up in the era described by Zeisler think institutions should have policies to address discrimination and improve diversity (Public Religion Research Institute 2015). Fifty-three percent of men agree, but only 46 percent of white men, those for whom feminism has mainly been portrayed as a zero-sum game.

As more and more companies and messages encouraged women to see feminism in terms of making their own (limited) choices and spending their (still-lower) salaries, men watched from the sidelines, growing increasingly anxious, because what was conveyed to them was that the thing that was for sale was actually their manhood. What marketplace feminism meant to men was a very different feminism, one that, for many, translated into loss, denial, identity crises, and ignorance. While it is true that today it appears that there is more widespread reluctance among women to acknowledge or confront systemic sexism or misogyny, the same is exceptionally true of men. Women might not be moved en masse to challenge what are clearly pressing inequalities, but men don’t even see why they would do so in the first place. That’s an entirely different sort of Stockholm Syndrome.

Men’s mystification over sexism and its enduring power, and their anger over feeling left behind in an era of rapid and transformational change, has shaped a new political reality. We are in the throes of a violent conservative contraction largely fueled by conservative white male disorientation and anger. According to a Public Religion Research Institute study, 52 percent of

white men had a “very unfavorable” view of Hillary Clinton—twenty points more than the percentage that said the same of Barack Obama in 2012 (Beinart 2016). Today, more conservatives, of either gender and any age, think that white men are more discriminated against than women.

Marketplace feminism has everything to do with the fact that the presidential campaign of an entire national political party, a virtual tsunami of misogyny, xenophobia, and racism, derived its biggest support from what *The Atlantic*’s Peter Beinart (2016) recently described as men who fear emasculation at the hands of a powerful woman leader. T-shirts, bumper stickers, and posters emblazoned with “DON’T BE A PUSSY,” “HILLARY SUCKS BUT NOT LIKE MONICA,” and “FINALLY SOMEONE WITH BALLS” attest to everyday sexism but also clearly illuminate the desire to restore men to a position of supremacy that they feel has been lost. Anti-Clinton sentiments such as these are as much the hallmark of marketplace feminism as the depoliticizing feminist industrial empowerment complex Zeisler describes.

Any next-generation feminist movements have to come to terms with this reality. I

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