

Pontifications on Power

By Fred Balzac

This essay was written as a “reflection” on a weekend course at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Plattsburgh, titled “Sexuality, Power & Relationships” (GWS 104A), taken in the spring of 2018 and led by Prof. Butterfly Blaise and students in the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies. In April 2022, the essay was awarded the bell hooks Writing Prize, awarded annually by the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies—this was the first year that the prize carried the name of bell hooks — “for an outstanding paper on a topic related to gender and intersectionality.”

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Things sure have changed since my first go-round as an undergraduate, in New York City in the — *gasp!* — late 1970s. Obtaining consent was not something expected of the person seeking to initiate sex and, if given by the sought-after partner, was often done so tacitly, not expressly. Sexual positivity had not, as a term, been invented yet and, I imagine, was lacking in most college students of the era — living as we did in the aftermath of the so-called “sexual revolution” of the 1960s, when letting your hair down and loving the one you’re with took precedence no matter how you felt about yourself. Hook-up culture existed but did not have a name yet; this was, after all, before the AIDS crisis and the life-or-death necessity of practicing safe sex — a quaint period when guys typically did not use condoms because it was expected that the woman was solely responsible for the method of birth control, despite the risks incurred to her long-term health. BDSM, meanwhile, was something you read about discreetly in the back pages of the Village Voice and decidedly NOT the topic of an open workshop during a weekend college course that students felt neither shame nor embarrassment in attending.

On the other hand, some things haven’t changed in 40 years — namely, the widespread threat of rape as a means of domination and an expression of power, usually by men over women; other forms of sexual abuse, including domestic violence and workplace harassment; gender-based inequity and discrimination, including against gay and transgender people; fear of the non-conforming other; and — the big ones — misogyny, racism, religious hatred, and ethnocentric-driven genocide. What has changed, to some degree, is individual and societal response to these pernicious constants. But while progress is being made on many fronts, we human beings and the

world we inhabit have a long way to go toward equality and justice, truth and reconciliation, and love or at least tolerance of those who are different than us.

In assessing the work that has to be done to reach such lofty goals, it is useful to acknowledge just how far we've come in the past four decades. What I find most remarkable at this moment—in the eighth year of the second decade of the twenty-first century — is the collective response to rape, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment as embodied by the #MeToo movement. The takedown of such powerful men and male celebrities as Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose, Garrison Keillor, Al Franken, Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K., and, just this past week, Bill Cosby has been swift and merciless. The torrent of recriminations, censures, and guilty verdicts — as if a deserving scarlet “S” for “sexual transgressor” has suddenly been emblazoned across every perpetrator's chest — has occurred regardless of where the abuser falls on the spectrum from inappropriate touching and exposure of one's private parts to serial rape. It's hard to know if or for how long this arc of justice will persist, but right now it feels like a sociocultural sea change spelling out what women (primarily) no longer have to endure or put up with and what men (almost always) no longer can take for granted or get away with. Of course, despite my liberal Democratic upbringing and now leftist Green leanings, I've been surprised, if happily so, by such landmarks of progressivism as the election of the first African-American president and the relatively quick and widespread acceptance of gay marriage in light of the fact that, as recently as 2004, it was used by the Republican Party as a wedge issue. But then again, even right-wingers like Dick Cheney have gay children. They also, presumably, have some transgender offspring, and it seems to me that society of late is beginning to embrace this latest group of bias-survivors to come out of the shadows and demand their rights

— destined to overcome the gender-based equivalent of Jim Crow laws such as the North Carolina bathroom bill.

On the other hand, before we get too far ahead of ourselves, we have — at the same time that the advances cited above are moving us forward — entered the *bizarro*, alternate-universe world of the Trump era, where backlash is a first response, racial and sexist epithets are not dirty words, and “Make America Great Again” is code for “Take America Back” to a time when white men ruled without question and women, blacks, Hispanics, gays, and other minority groups were second-class citizens or not recognized at all. It’s been observed that the election of Donald Trump could not have taken place without the election first of Barack Obama—that the embrace of Trump despite, or because of, the racist, sexist, and xenophobic views he espouses and stands for is a reaction against the empowerment of women, African-Americans, Hispanics, gays, etc. and the gradual but inevitable browning of once super-white America (just as the rise of radical Islamic fundamentalism is arguably a reaction against a modern world enlightened by sexual liberation and the increasing empowerment of women). I believe advances on the gender, racial, and sexual-preference fronts will continue to be made and that the current era — assuming Trump’s actions and policies don’t result in nuclear devastation or economic or environmental catastrophe — represents one-step back in the proverbial scheme that starts with “two steps forward.” What isn’t likely to change, however — at least not without economic collapse or some natural or human-derived cataclysm — is the current corporate-controlled power structure, whose ascendancy over the same past four decades since my initial college years, mirrors a precipitous decline in our democracy, of which the Trump presidency is only the latest symptom and not cause.

In this context, probably the most telling aspect of the Sexuality, Power & Relationships course was the Saturday workshop I attended titled “Socialist Feminism 101.” It was led by a cis-gender female student named Alyssa and a transgender female student named Gwendolyn who good-naturedly but rapidly rattled off an impressive array of convincing, if dense, academic observations about capitalist oppression of women and other non-dominant groups. Curiously, their joint presentation never once mentioned Karl Marx. I don’t know if it had anything to do with my presence, but they seemed a bit nervous, even slightly apologetic, as if they never expected an old, straight white guy like me to be in their audience. But my sympathies lie with them — certainly, as a feminist who believes in equality between women and men and among the various genders; and, if not as avowed socialist per se, then as an anti-capitalist. I have a theory about the system under which we currently live: it is a modern version of feudalism, with billionaire CEOs and hedge-fund managers serving as the lords and most of the rest of us playing the role of serfs. Back in the Dark Ages, people did not go around saying “We live in a feudal society.” Likewise, these days the word “capitalism” is hardly ever uttered by politicians or in the mainstream media — just as corporate control of the political and economic system is referenced only by a handful of progressive elites such as Bernie Sanders.

In such books as *Death of the Liberal Class* and his weekly column on truthdig.com, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges — who has my vote for the most incisive American political observer/dissident activist writing today — points to the “corporate coup d’état” as the root of such seemingly insurmountable problems as climate change; rising economic inequality and the impoverishment of half the population; despair and alienation as evidenced by the opioid crisis and neglect of veterans returning from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars; and the decaying of American democracy. I’d argue that ruthless corporatism and unrestrained capitalism are also at

the root of many of the problems discussed in this weekend course and that making this association is the start of at least addressing how to solve some of these problems. How to go about overcoming these twin obstacles to the realization of a “better world” is another matter. The contemporary focus on issues such as gender identity and intersectionality encompass important and necessary struggles for the freedom and empowerment of all peoples; but I worry that they may represent mere skirmishes in lieu of the larger battle that needs to be fought against the corporate-capitalist monolith dominating all. In other words, corporations can stomach and even sanction advances such as gay marriage, #MeToo-meted-out justice, and transgender rights as long as their proponents aren’t taking on or even just questioning the power structure. The energy of the 1960s that was directed toward an overthrow of “The System” appears to have been channeled largely into identity-group struggles by heretofore oppressed minorities to take their rightful place *in* the system. It was no less a figure than Martin Luther King Jr., after all, who shifted from advocating for civil rights to opposition to the Vietnam War and critique of the American capitalist system shortly before his death — and it’s not difficult to imagine that this transition had something to do with his assassination. Fighting for one’s right to sit at the front of the bus is one thing; calling into question the corporate leviathan’s right to profiteer from warmongering is something entirely else — and dangerously so.

The old guy, you say, doth protest too much: where do these protestations leave us? This November, I will turn 60. I am happily married to my wife, Kathy, and we live a good, mutually supportive life together; but the world we inhabit today is nothing close to what I envisioned it would be when I was in my twenties. We have a son who is 23. He is my hero, daring to go where I would not, perhaps could not, venture myself. Sam is, according to the estimation of many who know him and not just mine, brilliant — a talented actor, singer, dancer, musician,

composer and all-around sensitive New-Age guy who, despite his family's economic deprivations, had the privilege of an Ivy League education. And yet, he frets a bit about being a straight white male of no marked ethnic disposition living in a Cultural Moment that seems to belong to those who can claim membership among the Great Oppressed. His worry is absurd on the face of it, and I think Sam knows it: the world is his oyster and being an SWM is no limitation but still a huge advantage and the Privilege of privileges.

I've had the privilege of raising Sam and, now that he's independent, knowing him as an adult and also getting to know some of his peers over the past several years since my return to college here at SUNY Plattsburgh, beginning with the Multimedia Journalism Certificate that I finally earned this past December. I envy these Millennials their youth but not much else. The world — in the form of smartphones and other technological black holes — is too much with us. Now, with rising seas closing in and exponentially rising populations clamoring for shrinking natural resources, the young have a lot to deal with. I wish my generation of Baby Boomers could deal them a better hand, hand them that “better world,” but I fear we won't. I do have faith in Sam and his peers, a remarkable generation that has what it takes to slay the fire-breathing dragons of sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. But I also wish them the wisdom, strength and courage to see the power structure for what it is — the source of the fire that, for things to really change, must be put out.