

**Laurie Penny**

This is a story about  
how modern masculinity  
is killing the world, and  
how feminism can save it.

It's a story about sex and  
power and trauma and  
resistance and persistence.

And at the heart of that  
story is one simple idea:  
we are in the middle of a

**Sexual Revolution**

Modern Fascism and the Feminist Fightback

B L O O M S B U R Y

# Sexual Revolution

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Penny Red*

*Meat Market*

*Discordia*

*Cybersexism*

*Unspeakable Things*

*Bitch Doctrine*

Laurie Penny

# Sexual Revolution

Modern Fascism and the Feminist Fightback

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G

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To David Boarder Giles



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## INTRODUCTION

This is a story about the choice between feminism and fascism. It's a story about sex and power and trauma and resistance and persistence. It's a story about work, and who does it, and why. It's a story about how you can track the crisis of democracy against the crisis of white masculinity, and how the far right is rising in response to both. And at the centre of that story is one simple idea.

We are living, all of us, through a paradigm shift in power relations between the genders. The world is mired in a crisis of care and of reproduction that is transforming society, as millions of women and their allies struggle to build a better, fairer society – and millions of men try to stop them. The world, in other words, is in the middle of a sexual revolution.

And it matters more than most of us have been allowed to imagine. It matters because sex and gender are not political side-issues. They never have been. Sex and gender affect everything and everyone – they are, as theorist Shulamith Firestone put it, 'underpinnings'.<sup>1</sup> That means that any challenge to the social norms of sex and gender has to be ambitious. For example, if you want to end sexual harassment in the workplace, you must first redefine the terms of both work and sex – and how much of either can be demanded from a human being against their will. You must be prepared to imagine a world where exploitative, exhausting work and joyless, coercive sex are no longer the norm. Modern feminism is intellectually, creatively and ethically ambitious because it has to be, even though ambition in women

and girls is still considered morally suspect. This book is ambitious because I would rather be ambitious than waste anyone's time.

I've been a political journalist for twelve years. I've reported on activist movements around the Global North, and everywhere I've heard protesters and pundits predicting a great reckoning, a coming cultural shift that would sweep away all our socioeconomic certainties. But when that enormous change actually came, almost everyone was looking the other way. Because when it came, it came from women.

All over the world, women and queer people are rewriting the terms of a social contract that was never supposed to include us. Women of colour, Indigenous women, trans women and young women are driving this change. They are remaking the future in a shape that redefines freedom as universal and demands it for everyone, not simply for white, straight, wealthy cis men. I believe that paradigm shift will remake our civilisation – is remaking it as I write – despite the backlash from a fragile, savage minority that would rather burn the world than share it.

Sex and gender are in crisis, and that crisis is reshaping society. The pattern repeats across and beyond the Global North, as changes in the balance of power between men and women provoke a brutal political backlash – and women refuse to be intimidated into giving up their power. In the summer of 2016 a teenage girl was gang-raped in the Spanish town of Pamplona. The five men who were arrested for the attack referred to themselves as La Manada – the wolf pack. Their trial made international headlines, as a high-profile incident of sexual violence became a referendum on the nature of power in a divided nation. When the 'wolf pack' was acquitted of rape in April 2018, hundreds of thousands of women poured into plazas throughout Spain demanding changes to the law. Shortly afterwards, decrying the threat of radical feminism, the political party Vox became the first far-right party to take multiple seats in Spain since Franco. But the women of Spain would not be cowed. In the plazas, they chanted, '*Tranquila hermana, aquí está tu manada*'. Don't worry, sister. We are your wolf pack.

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Almost nobody saw it coming. Nobody predicted that the greatest challenge to the social order in this century would be women, girls and queer people, particularly women, girls and queer people of colour, finally coming together to talk about sexual violence and structural abuses of power. Something has broken. Something is breaking still. Not like a glass breaks or like a heart breaks, but like the shell of an egg breaks – inexorably, and from the inside. Something wet and angry is fighting its way out of the dark, and it has claws.

This book is an attempt to describe and to challenge the material reality of sex and power in the modern age. It covers a lot of ground, but it all comes down to a few basic central themes.

Firstly – all of us are living in a political economy of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a power system based on male dominance that is designed to keep everyone, of every gender, in their assigned roles, concentrating wealth and agency in the hands of a paranoid few. Patriarchy underwrites the other key power structures that perpetuate injustice: capitalism and white supremacy. And patriarchy, crucially, does *not* mean ‘a system ruled by men’. It means ‘a system ruled by *fathers*’. It means a system where a handful of old, entitled white men get to tell everyone else what to do, and that’s not just unfair – it’s actively dangerous.

Secondly – we are living through a profound and permanent alteration in what gender means, what sex means, and whose bodies matter. This is a time of productive disobedience, where women, men and LGBTQ people everywhere are rejecting the gender binary as a mode of power, and walking quietly away from the expectations imposed on them by thousands of years of patriarchy.

These changes are calling into existence new ways of organising care, reproduction and the work of building and sustaining the human species – ways of life that are not based on competition, coercion and dominance but on consent, community and pleasure. Consent is the organising philosophy behind many of these changes. The importance of consent cannot be overstated – and consent is a concept that goes way beyond sex.

Thirdly – these changes are profoundly threatening to the social and economic certainties that form our world. They disturb existing power structures. They undermine the authority of institutions from the waged workplace to the nuclear family. This sexual revolution is, by its very nature, a threat to heterosexuality, to male supremacy, to white supremacy, to traditional ways of dividing labour, organising bodies and distributing wealth.

And those who are invested in these power structures are fighting back.

All of this is happening during a time of crisis, collapse and relentless social upheaval, as the biosphere implodes, the global economy totters, and tyrants exploit this uncertainty to seize power, promising their supporters a return to the old, violent certainties of gender, race and nation.

Lastly, and most importantly – the tyrants and bullies won't win. At least, not for long. They can't win, because they are incapable of offering any meaningful vision of the future. They want to rule, not lead. They want control, not responsibility. They have no interest in sustaining and maintaining human life, and they have no plan. Men like Putin, Bolsonaro, Trump and Johnson built political followings that baffled their critics in the political mainstream, who rushed to point out that these men were feckless wastrels who lied as easily as breathing and had spent their lives failing upwards and dodging responsibility – that these men were obviously, embarrassingly unfit to run so much as a bath, let alone a country. This, of course, was precisely their appeal. These were men who got away with it, men who laughed in the face of consequences, men who weaponised their own vacuous charisma, Gordon Gekkos of the attention economy who wanted only power and had not thought for a moment about what they might do with it.

If patriarchy is the rule of fathers, our current rulers are feckless fathers – deadbeat dads who have proven themselves dangerously inadequate to the duties of the power they caused such chaos to secure. They are weak, and they are trivial, and they know it.

Patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism and white supremacy are not too big to fail. In fact, they do nothing but fail, and have done

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nothing but fail upwards for generations. The question is not whether white capitalist patriarchy will collapse. The question is how many people it will crush on the way down.

This book picks out the patterns in the contemporary wreckage of sex and power, seeking a map to a more life-sustaining world. It starts in the tender, vicious underbelly of political economy. It starts with sex.

Sexual freedom doesn't exist. Not yet. In most democracies, most of us are legally free to love who we want, live how we like and pursue pleasure however we choose – but only in the same way that most of us are free to buy a Maserati, or a mansion, or an election. In practice, most people cannot afford sexual freedom. Most women, and most LGBTQ people of all genders, cannot afford sexual liberation – because the social costs of simply naming their desires are still so high.

Sexual liberation cannot be achieved while sexual power is unequally distributed. Today, in almost every society on earth, straight men still have far more social, political and economic agency than women, girls and LGBTQ people. Patriarchy and white supremacy are political systems that give men power over women and white people power over Black, brown and Indigenous people. This isn't power that all white people and all men have. It's not power that all of them asked for. But it's power they were raised to expect, power that feels painful to lose. It is structural power, economic power, power that means that, on the whole, white people are richer, freer and more independent than people of colour, and men are wealthier and more independent than women. This means that women and queer people, particularly women and queer people of colour, still negotiate for sexual and bodily autonomy under conditions of inequality.

The best way to correct power imbalances in society is for the weaker players to organise collectively. When women come together to argue, for example, for a change in the way rape is prosecuted, that is collective bargaining. When women begin to share stories of sexual harassment at work and to demand that there be stronger consequences for abusive employers, that is collective bargaining.

When people who can become pregnant decide not to do so until the material conditions of parenthood improve, that too is collective bargaining. That's what this sexual revolution is all about.

You can't have a sexual revolution without addressing sexual violence for the same reason that you can't have an economic revolution without addressing workers' rights. A sexual 'revolution' that simply makes sex easier to access for people who have more power is in no way radical. In fact, any sort of revolution that preaches liberation while leaving the rich and powerful free to exploit, bully and abuse will inevitably begin to rot in the damp heat of its own contradictions.

This sexual revolution is different. This sexual revolution goes deeper, because it deals not just with sexual licence but with sexual liberation. It is not just about freedom *from*, but freedom *to*. It is a fundamental reimagining of gender roles and sexual rules, work and love, trauma and violence, pleasure and power. The new sexual revolution is a feminist one. And the most important thing to realise about this sexual revolution is that it is already happening.

Here's why it's happening. Not very long ago, power in most human societies was organised around a strict gender binary, based roughly on reproductive sex. There were men and women, and men were strong and powerful, and women were nurturing and powerless, and women were the property of men. On the basis of bimodal sex, humans were forced to take on the roles of soldiers or victims in a strict gendered power hierarchy. Half of humanity was coralled into the political category of 'womanhood' – which meant that their bodies and desires were men's to dispose of. Their role was to care for men and boys, to bear and raise children, and to take only a decorative role in public life unless they happened to be a hereditary monarch. The earliest political theorists explicitly excluded women and children from the 'social contract' that is the foundation of modern statehood. The economic and social structures of every modern culture were built on the bones of those assumptions. All of us were born and raised in those structures.

But over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, something changed. Advances in medical science meant that,

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for the first time in human history, women were able to reliably control their own fertility. Safe medical abortion and advances in contraceptive technology meant that women and girls could – in theory – decide when and if they had children, which meant that the stakes of human sexuality and society changed for ever. It meant that it was no longer so easy to keep women and girls shamed into sexual compliance and dependent on marriage. The consequences of this technological shift have been profound, and we have only begun to cope with them.

Today, despite the devastating impact of pandemics and recessions on women's employment, there are more women and queer people in the traditional male workplace than there have been for centuries; more women and queer people making art, making laws, making history. Meanwhile, the once fundamental social structures of family and faith are falling apart. More and more women and girls are boycotting marriage and motherhood. In fact, women's increasing freedom has led to a demographic time bomb, as parenthood becomes an unsustainable choice in developed nations that still refuse to pay for the work of care and childrearing.

This is work that has, until now, been done mostly by women, mostly for free. But as motherhood becomes harder and less affordable, as governments refuse to pay for the work of social care, and as women refuse to be bullied into making babies in impossible circumstances, birth rates are plummeting across and beyond the Global North. To put it another way, women and queer people, particularly women and queer people of colour, are simply refusing to be held hostage to male fragility.

They are refusing in numbers too big to ignore. As economist and journalist Paul Mason observes in his work *Clear Bright Future*, anti-feminism is now a key recruiting ground for the new right, a phenomenon Mason traces back to:

the reversal of male biological power, through birth control and equal rights legislation, that took place during the last decades of the twentieth century...

In the fifty years following the rollout of the contraceptive pill, developed-world society has experienced what Federal Reserve chief Janet Yellen called a ‘reproductive shock’. The results do not come anywhere close to women’s liberation ... [but] the basic assumption behind misogyny, that women are destined to stick to their biologically determined role as child-bearers and unpaid domestic workers, has been blown to smithereens.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside these shifts in power relations between men and women, the ‘basic assumptions’ of heterosexuality and gender identity have also been exploded.

The gender binary itself is being superseded as a form of social control. Since the early 2010s there has been a seismic cultural shift in the cultural visibility of trans and non-binary people. A great many young people in particular are coming out en masse as transgender, genderqueer or non-binary, and that’s a positive change. It is a great deal more normal to be openly trans than it was even a decade ago, but social conservatives are loudly resisting this change, as are many political-interest groups afraid of a world beyond the gender binary.

In this book, when I talk about ‘men’ and ‘women’ and what they do, I am not talking about biological essentialism. This book does not subscribe to any authoritarian view of gender that divides the world into immutable biological categories, pink and blue, binary and biddable, nor does it believe in imposing political destiny on diverse human bodies without their consent. Essentialism is invariably conservative. When I write about ‘men’ or about ‘women’, I am including everyone who locates themselves in those categories. I identify as genderqueer myself, meaning that the category of ‘woman’ does not fully describe my lived experience.

Gender roles and gender stereotypes are imposed on our bodies from birth, without our consent – and the process of learning to occupy the gender you have been assigned is often traumatic. A great many cis men I interviewed in the course of

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writing this book carry profound emotional scars from decades of savage social policing, of being punished for any deviance from perceived ‘masculine’ norms. There is no universal experience of womanhood or of manhood. Instead, this book describes many common experiences of sex, consent and power, and invites every reader of every gender to try them on for size.

The sexual scripts of our generation vindicate dominance and venerate violence while censoring queerness, community and pleasure. Well before a young woman comes of age, she is made aware that her body is a commodity, and that that commodity is not wholly hers to command. Legislation has not eradicated the cultural logic of male entitlement to women’s bodies – and particularly to the bodies of Black, brown and Indigenous women, who live with the historical trauma and vestigial memory of having been, quite literally, traded as commodities. In Britain, 38 per cent of girls aged fourteen to twenty-one report verbal harassment in public places at least once a month,<sup>3</sup> and one BBC survey documented that more than half of British women had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.<sup>4</sup> A study of 42,000 people in the European Union found that every second woman (55 per cent) has experienced sexual harassment at least once since the age of fifteen.<sup>5</sup>

When women speak out of turn, we can expect to be punished. We’re being provocative. We should know our place. For me, I had been writing about politics for two years when I found the first hate site dedicated to fantasies about my rape and murder. I was twenty-three years old. All I had ever wanted to do was to describe my life as I experienced it and take part in a public political conversation. I didn’t expect to be punished for it so savagely. I didn’t expect the pile-ons, the violent fantasies, the vicious hatemongering – from dedicated attack sites to the comments sections of more respectable publications. I didn’t expect the frightening emails, the badly doctored porn with my face pasted on it. I didn’t expect to have to explain any of that to my family, my friends, my bosses, all of whom were wondering what I’d done to make these people so angry. It was assumed that

I must have done something. I thought so, too. I assumed I had brought it on myself, assumed that I had asked for it, somehow. And if I ever mentioned it, that's what I was told – *don't read the comments. Suck it up. Grow a thick skin. This is just what the internet is like.* I was scared and ashamed, and I was very young.

I soon realised I was far from the only one who'd been made to feel scared and ashamed. Slowly, women and queer people who were going through the same thing started to find each other. The men who were attacking us – and it was almost exclusively men – were serious, and they were organised. In 2011, I started to speak openly about the experience of online abuse, rather than being ashamed of it in private. I wrote that having an opinion is the short skirt of the internet – if you go out with one in public you're assumed to be inviting violence. You deserve everything you get. You're provocative. You asked for it.

Two generations have gone by since Germaine Greer wrote in *The Female Eunuch* that 'women have no idea how much men hate them.'<sup>6</sup> Well, we do now. Much of the harassment women faced online in the mid-2010s was driven and managed by sites like Breitbart that later became soapboxes for the far right. In the new mob misogyny, the emerging far right saw a key recruiting ground.

As we'll explore later in this book, the political strategies that are currently being used to mobilise angry young men to vote for populist thugs were first developed and deployed in the online culture war against women – and often by the same people. This frightening trend reached its first frenzied crisis point in 2013–14 with 'Gamergate'<sup>7</sup> – a concocted controversy in the video-games industry, in which one female creator's vengeful ex-boyfriend's accusation of cheating mushroomed into a global misogynist movement involving hundreds of thousands of angry young men incensed that women had dared invade their sacred space. Suddenly, harassment of women online became organised and gamified – and the game didn't stop there.

Misogyny and anti-feminism are the backlash to the sexual revolution – and nowhere is this backlash more apparent than

in the election of ‘strong men’ in and beyond the Global North. From Britain and the United States to India and Brazil, self-serving narcissists coast to power on a swell of weaponised male resentment and racial supremacy, incoherently promising to bring back a lost age of national greatness, of law and order and ‘family values’, where women are forcibly returned to their traditional roles as wives and mothers, sexually submissive and socially sidelined. Most attention focuses, not without justification, on the attacks by these regimes on designated ‘outsiders’ – whether they be immigrants, people of colour, LGBTQ people, Muslims or Jews. But a certain strain of revanchist sexism, with its promise to restore a particular form of domineering patriarchy, is often the point of entry to these movements – the underlying philosophy that draws men and women alike to the new cause of ‘nationalist oligarchy’.

It is overwhelmingly white men who vote for these neo-masculinist leaders, and part of the promise these leaders make is a return to ‘traditional values’ – to a fictional past where men were real men and women were grateful. The fantasy imagines a restoration of the rule of fathers, of a society strictly corralled into monogamous, heterosexual, Christian, largely Caucasian family units, with women and children subservient to a male head of the household. A vengeful entitlement to the bodies and affection of women and girls is a common chorus in the new far-right song sheet. It’s an explicitly violent sexual paradigm – but it refuses to understand itself as sexually violent. Instead, sexual violence is reimagined as an outside threat – not something that white men do, but something that foreign or immigrant men do to ‘our’ women, who must be protected not because they are people but because they are property.

That’s why it’s a mistake to talk about modern misogyny without talking about race and racism. The two are not structurally the same, but they cannot be separated, either. This is, in part, what theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw meant when she coined the term ‘intersectionality’. Different forms of oppression overlap and ‘intersect’, and cannot be properly understood

on their own. White supremacy as a political system is deeply gendered – it relies on a specific ideology of white male power that entitles white men to the control of all women’s bodies. That is why, since the days of the campaign for the abolition of slavery in America, the movements for the liberation of women and for the emancipation of people of colour have been connected – although that connection, as this book explores later, has never been comfortable. White women are continually called on to challenge their own prejudices and centre women of colour, who have historically been the first to take on the risk of speaking out against sexual violence and to expose the political economy of misogyny.

In an insecure and frightening economic climate, ‘nothing seems to stimulate or threaten conventional stability so deeply as the shifting terrain of gender’, writes science reporter Frank Browning in his book *The Fate of Gender*.<sup>8</sup> ‘Backlash and resentment run deeply through middle- and working-class white America, evidenced not least by the surge in misogynist messages that have surfaced across social media.’<sup>9</sup> Much of that resentment is directed at women who appear to be seeking more power than they deserve. ‘Moral outrage’, according to researchers, is still the predominant response to women seeking power. During the 2016 American Presidential primaries, when voters were asked questions designed to remind them that many women now earn more than men, men became less likely to support Hillary Clinton.<sup>10</sup> Moral outrage that women are taking up space in public life without apology drives a great deal of the voting behaviour of conservatives and neo-conservatives around the world. The difference in voting behaviour between men and women is as significant – and in many nations, more significant – than it is between people of colour and whites. In the UK, millennial men were twenty percentage points more likely to back a right-wing or far-right candidate than millennial women.

This moral outrage takes many forms. Some are explicit, such as the regimes of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro in

Brazil and Vladimir Putin in Russia, all of which have legalised domestic violence against women; others are indirect, as in Britain, where the Conservative administration under successive prime ministers simply made tens of thousands of women workers redundant, slashed salaries and cut funding to domestic violence and legal-aid provisions, making it economically impossible for battered women to leave violent partners or challenge them in court.

‘Conservatives,’ as the American journalist Amanda Marcotte writes, ‘prefer a system where men’s freedom is contingent on women’s servitude.’<sup>11</sup> Marcotte quotes the American senator Josh Hawley, who believes that ‘freedom is undesirable if it is “a philosophy of liberation from family and tradition, of escape from God and community, a philosophy of self-creation and unrestricted, unfettered free choice”’.<sup>12</sup> By ‘family and tradition’, Hawley – and many others – mean ‘women in their place’.

In the modern conservative imagination, the ideal of ‘freedom’ was never intended to include people of colour or white women. Wealthy right-wing men wax lyrical about the importance of responsibility with the desperate confidence that comes from never having had to scrub their own toilets and not caring to start. As cultural commentator Franklin Leonard has observed, ‘When you’re accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.’

But the real measure of oppression is not how angry you are, it’s how angry you are allowed to be. That’s why the anger of straight white men in the Global North often feels so overwhelming, while the rage of women and of men of colour against structural violence and historical oppression is pathologised, excluded from the political conversation. Women speaking out against institutional rape ‘go too far’ and ‘lose control’; young people of colour protesting against police violence are simply ‘thugs’; white men, by contrast, have ‘legitimate concerns’.

Across and beyond the Global North, patriarchy is running scared and fighting dirty.

The aggrieved entitlement of ordinary men trying to carve a philosophy out of their refusal to manage a moment's discomfort is easy to exploit. It can be marshalled. It can be channelled. The promise of restoring lost white masculine pride sells policy, delivers votes and anoints emperors. And sexual entitlement is the language in which that promise is spoken.

Around the world, the far right is on the rise – and feminism has been identified as its enemy. Steve Bannon – the Breitbart CEO, former chief advisor to Donald Trump and the man more responsible than any other individual in the world for shaping the 'alt-right' into the political force it is today – explicitly used male fear of female power to build a movement. Bannon called modern feminism 'the single most powerful potential political movement in the world'<sup>13</sup>... 'or what I call the "anti-patriarchy movement".'<sup>14</sup> And Bannon was not the only right-wing demagogue to weaponise misogyny for his own ends.

The new far right uses tools of political coercion that evolved from dating strategies designed to work around women's sexual consent. You can trace many of the tactics and cod philosophies of modern fascism back to the cultural sewer of online men's groups – to communities of miserable, frustrated young men drawn together by common resentment of womankind. As we'll see in later chapters, modern fascism targets vulnerable young white men and convinces them that feminism, anti-racism and liberalism are a threat to the very soul of white Western manhood.

In fact, modern masculinity is its own worst enemy. In the years since the financial crash of 2008, countless millions of men have grown up and grown older facing insecurity, lack of stability, lacking everything that was supposed to give their lives meaning. Among the few things they have left to give them a sense of familiarity and purpose are traditional gender roles – specifically the social scripts that reserve respect and status for 'strong' men who can attract and dominate submissive women. This convinces many men that what's really lacking in their lives is not economic justice or social security but simply a woman – any woman – to care for them and prop up the shards of an ego

shredded by modern life; a woman to make them feel important, needed, seen and heard, when so little else does. It is easier, after all, to blame women, feminism and ‘woke culture’ for everything that feels unfair in modern life than it is to blame the economy, or the government, or yourself.<sup>15</sup>

When society becomes unstable and men feel fragile and insecure, women suffer. As daily life becomes more precarious and public funding for healthcare, welfare, housing, education and social care is cut by governments around the world, women are expected to step in and provide more and more of that vital work of care, either for free, within relationships, or in the low-paid, low-status, insecure domestic jobs that are filled overwhelmingly by immigrant and working-class women. During the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020, as millions of people were forced to ‘shelter in place’ with abusive partners and spouses, domestic violence more than doubled.<sup>16</sup> Of course, women have also had to grow up and build lives in the same toxic, demeaning job market on the same burning planet; women have had to survive falling wages and rising rents, unmanageable debts and career insecurity, and on top of all of that, women have also had to survive the men who blame them for it all.

All over the world, women are under attack as a political class. The barrage is social, economic and interpersonal, and it is happening on every front. There has been an enormous rise in reports of sexual harassment in recent years, thanks in part to the #MeToo movement – and that rise is not all down to increased reporting. According to the US National Crime Victimization Survey,<sup>17</sup> self-reported incidence of rape or sexual assault more than doubled from 2017 to 2018. In the UK, despite a similar rise in self-reported experiences of violence,<sup>18</sup> prosecutions of rape cases are currently at a ten-year low.<sup>19</sup> While violent crime as a whole has declined around the developed world since the 1990s, gendered violence is a consistent and increasing danger to the lives of women and girls – and the response from traditional institutions of justice has been deafening disinterest. Intimate partner violence against women is still treated as a private matter, rather than an issue of public justice.

Meanwhile, abortion provision is being violently undermined across the globe. Newly emboldened by the appointment of conservative Associate Justice Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court, states across America have been passing bills virtually banning the practice. In countries like Poland and Spain, hard-won laws enshrining women's right to choose to terminate pregnancy have been rolled back. Again, it's crucial to understand where this started: that the right-wing movement against reproductive rights has been gathering momentum for decades. It began in the 1980s as a deliberate response to second-wave feminism and the new freedoms some women were beginning to enjoy – and as a way to unite Southern conservatives against Black liberation.

There is a pattern here, a single thread running from the #MeToo movement to the surge in misogynist violence, from the backlash against abortion rights across the Global North to the dramatic decline in birth rates around the world and the terrifying rise in young men committing mass murder in the name of sexual revenge, as this book explores in depth in later chapters. There's a pattern behind all of it. The common denominator is fear. Fear of change. Fear of irrelevance. Fear of women. Fear of how women are changing, becoming freer, braver, less inclined to place men's comfort above their own human rights. The common denominator is moral outrage. Outrage that oppressed people are daring to name their own oppression, that victims of abuse are no longer sticking to their prescribed social role, no longer hiding the damage done to them, beginning to demand consequences.

This sexual revolution confronts abuse of power at every level. And this book deals explicitly with abuse, exploitation and trauma, not just as individual problems but as political phenomena. The logic of abuse is central to the way in which power operates – from world governments, institutions and industries, to individual families. This book argues that many traditional models of social organisation, from the nuclear family to parliamentary politics, do not simply enable abuse – they require abuse. They require that exploitation, bullying, male supremacy and white supremacy be normal and normalised.

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Our culture is shaped and reshaped by abuse, and by the scars it leaves on the individual and collective psyche. But abuse has rarely been deemed worthy of political attention. Instead, where it is spoken of at all, it is usually something that has to be borne in private, healed in isolation – and that’s useful, because it places all the responsibility for change on the individual who suffers, and not on the systems that cause suffering. Just in case anyone fails to get the message, those who do speak out about abuse can expect punishment and public humiliation, especially if they are women.

But speaking about abuse, exploitation and trauma are crucial if we want to understand how oppression operates. People who learn from a young age that adults are allowed to hurt children, that men are allowed to hurt women, that police officers are allowed to hurt people from marginalised communities, that the strong are allowed to prey upon the weak and the weak cannot rely on help arriving, will reshape their imaginations around that narrative. They will be more, not less, likely to accept bullying and exploitation as a normal part of their working lives. And this logic of exploitation has been upheld, time and time again, in recent years of political upheaval. Even as women and children have begun to speak out in ever-more confident chorus about their experience of abuse, known abusers have been elevated to the highest positions of public office and political responsibility. Watching violent bullies be rewarded hurts in a way that is hard to look away from if you have been a victim of abuse yourself, as a very great many of us have, even if we don’t like to think of ourselves that way. Victims, in fact, routinely seem to burden themselves with the shame that should properly belong to those who victimise others. In fact, the amount of shame still attached to being a person who has experienced violence or persecution today has everything to do with the desire to silence victims and normalise abuse.

Again, on every level, from the institutional to the individual, the attempt to come to terms with the injustice and scale

of abuse has created chaos. People and communities have torn themselves apart trying to square their desire for justice with their desire not to think about wrongdoing. Victims and survivors have struggled to hold the centre of themselves in the storm of cognitive dissonance that buffets anyone who knows that something terrible and unfair has happened to them, but who still thinks on some level that it was their fault, that they're wrong to complain, that they don't deserve to be believed, that they cannot allow themselves to believe the evidence of their own experience.

Revolution does not begin in the streets. Revolution begins in the head, and in the heart. Sexual revolution happens whenever a person decides, in the face of years of carefully nurtured self-loathing, in a culture that tells her every day that her body does not belong to her, that her sexuality is a commodity for men's consumption, that her pleasure does not matter, that her ambition makes her unlikeable and her desires make her disgusting and her exhaustion make her weak – sexual revolution happens when a person who has learned all these things decides to like herself anyway and to treat herself as if she were a person worthy of respect, as if she were a person who does not owe her body or her energy or the work of her life as the rent for existing in a man's world. When a woman behaves as if her life matters and her happiness counts, a tiny revolution takes place. And when many millions of them do, all at once, the world changes for ever. As Shulamith Firestone wrote in *The Dialectic of Sex*:

Just as to ensure elimination of economic classes requires the revolt of the underclass (the proletariat) and, in a temporary dictatorship, their seizure of the means of production, so to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women) and the seizure of control of reproduction: not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility.<sup>20</sup>

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In the early autumn of 2017, something snapped. Women and a few brave men finally began to come forward to speak, in numbers too big to dismiss, about the sexual harassment and abuse they had endured. It had been coming for years, but when the dam finally broke, it began in Hollywood.

In 2017, the exposé of the mega-producer and serial rapist Harvey Weinstein started a flood of women's stories, and a seismic shift in the way that most of us think and speak about sexual violence. Weinstein had been a public figure for decades, the personification of patriarchy gone to rot in a standing pool of self-satisfaction, groping and raping his way through decades of moneyed entitlement, strategising to silence every one of his sixty-plus victims, fully aware that what he was doing was vile. His victims were the first to stand up together, many of them after years of being shamed into silence, threatened with lawsuits, and iced out of the industry. At the clogged heart of mass culture, rich and beautiful women who had spent their lives being paid to speak lines men had written for them started to use their own voices to tell a different story. When one woman names her abuser, that is an act of rebellion. When many do, that is a resistance movement.

Connected by the #MeToo hashtag, first coined ten years ago by US activist Tarana Burke, the movement raced across industries, across oceans, to the very heart of politics. Powerful men began to retreat with their reputations between their legs. Frantic conversations started at the highest levels: what did these women want? How might they be stopped? The story was veering wildly off-script, but the cameras were still rolling, and men who for a long time had believed themselves the protagonists of their own cosy narratives started panicking. Weinstein's lawyer defended him as a clueless fool, an unreconstructed 'old dinosaur'; other men in his position scrambled to control the narrative with the wide-eyed panic of Jurassic predators trying to negotiate with an asteroid.

As women all over the world came forward to talk about their experiences of sexual violence, old certainties about what constituted normal, acceptable behaviour between men and

women, between those with power and those without it, began to peel away like dead skin.

Half a decade later, it's still happening. It's not just Hollywood, and it's not just Silicon Valley. It's not just in the White House or behind the scenes at Fox News. It's happening in the art world and in mainstream political parties. It's happening in the London radical left, in the US Democratic Party, in the Australian parliament and in the world of international aid. It's happening in academia and in the media and in legal and therapeutic professions. It's been happening for decades. It's still happening. Wandering hands and daily dehumanisation remain a weary assault course not just for women trying to make their mark in entertainment or finance or media or politics, but for the many millions fighting to survive in lower-paid, lower-status jobs. Shortly after the #MeToo movement broke, tens of thousands of domestic workers started speaking out about their experience of abuse. McDonald's workers declared that their bodies were not on the menu.

The movement against male domination and sexual coercion appeared, for a brief moment, to bridge divides of race and class. Migrant agricultural labourers spoke out against domestic violence at the same time as Hollywood actors, journalists, politicians and technologists were organising to bring down serial predators in their industries. Defiance, for these women, began the only way workplace defiance ever does: at the point where people decide that the risk of staying silent is greater than the risk of speaking out. When people realise that their struggles aren't unique, that their pain is real and it matters, the sensation is terrifying and liberating at once. There is an exhilaration to realising that you are allowed to trust yourself, that it's not crazy to want another world, or that even if you are crazy, it doesn't mean you're wrong.

A great many alleged abusers and their allies responded to these revelations with pleas for more understanding, with insistence that accusers consider the context of these crimes. Well, of course. Context is vital. It is crucial to consider the context in which this all-out uprising against toxic white male entitlement is taking place. The context is a historical moment where it has become

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obvious that white male entitlement is the greatest collective threat to the survival of the species.

That isn't a metaphor. Political consent and sexual consent are not analogous. They are *correlative*. They feed one another. The search for a more human understanding of power and consent is not simply stage dressing for a bigger fight. It *is* the big fight. It's all about the grabby old men, and the young men groping for power in their wake, and it always has been. 'What will happen when women everywhere flick on every light in the house ... and men no longer have any darkness left to hide in?' asks writer Caitlin Johnstone at Medium. 'It is unimaginable. Power structures will be disrupted from the basic family unit all the way up to the highest echelons of influence.'<sup>21</sup> This book deals directly with the implications of this seismic shift – and the threat it poses to traditional systems of power.

Modern states are sexist and racist by their very nature, because their power structures are built on the exploitation of people of colour and of white women. Sexual violence and racist oppression are fundamental to how work, money and resources are organised in most modern societies. This is not a new idea. Theorists like Catharine A. MacKinnon have observed how fundamental gendered power is to the formation of the modern state. MacKinnon, however, believed that sexual violence is the source code of that power differential – that the state was constructed to facilitate male sexual violence against women. This book argues otherwise. Sexual violence is not the end goal of white supremacist patriarchy – it's an enforcing mechanism.

The real point of maintaining hierarchies of gender and race, the hierarchies that scaffold most modern political systems, is not controlling sex, but controlling *work*. Our architectures of racist and sexist violence are designed to coerce people of colour and most white women into doing the hard, repetitive, essential labour of sustaining life so that a minority of white, wealthy men don't have to – an arrangement that is, ultimately, to everyone's detriment.

Sex is part of this story. My generation inherited a world where sex was cheap but not free. We inherited a culture of boring,

violent, coercive heterosexuality. We grew up being warned that sex was something dangerous, something violent that boys did to girls, something that men needed and women controlled, something that strong men wanted and nice girls didn't let them have too easily. We grew up marinated in a flood of mainstream pornography that rephrased sex as a factory line of bodies battering each other into submission, of ritual violence being done to women and girls, of hammering, nailing, smashing, wrecking, choking, slapping, destroying, a language of sex that was as strait-laced, joyless and competitive as everything else in our lives.

Modern society conflates sex and power, creating an environment where the idea of freedom is fetishised in theory and flattened in practice. Where every desire must become the desire to dominate. Where power, violence and authority are eroticised, sex itself becomes authoritarian.

Authoritarian tendencies are baked into mainstream political culture. A more specific term for this tendencies are what some people call neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is, quite simply, a way of organising society – from politics to culture and commerce – so that the needs of the market and of private gain take precedence over everything else. It describes a specific form of global capitalism where nothing is more important than what can be sold, and to whom, and for how much. Where human life itself has no inherent value, where every human urge is channelled towards greater productivity and most of us spend most of our time working ourselves to the raw nerves for someone else's profit. More than anything else, neoliberalism is allergic to the idea of human beings living, organising and caring for one another collectively – instead, it imagines a world order where individuals and their families struggle alone in a world of ruthless competition where only the strongest and luckiest survive. This is why neoliberalism eventually becomes authoritarianism. And neoliberalism, like every form of authoritarianism, is not just about controlling what people do; it is about controlling how they think and feel. But eventually, something is bound to snap.

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Something usually does. Wilhelm Reich was one of the first philosophers to pay attention to the way in which sexual frustration was being whipped up and manipulated by the despots of the 1930s and channelled towards violent imperialist and racist ends. He observed in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* that ‘the suppression of natural sexual gratification leads to various kinds of substitute gratifications ... Natural aggression, for example, becomes brutal sadism which then is an essential mass-psychological factor in imperialistic wars.’<sup>22</sup>

The same is true today, from Islamic State to the American far right: the strategic use of sexual frustration and weaponised misogyny in the radicalisation of young men is consistent across ideologies. Sadly, the entitlement that underlies it is not exclusive to fascist movements. The opposite of consent culture is not rape culture – it is authoritarianism.

Sexual authoritarianism occurs when straight men can no longer count on women’s sexual compliance. Again, this is more than a metaphor. Sexual repression is more than simply an analogy for political oppression. Sexual repression is real, and political oppression is real, and the two are related. Both tend to involve powerful men grabbing whatever they feel entitled to, whatever the cost, and getting away with it – because the laws that ought to hold them accountable were written by and for people just like them. This is the very essence of privilege, a word which literally means ‘private law’.

To challenge sexual exploitation is ultimately to challenge male privilege on every level, from the political to the personal. It is to insist on the right of all bodies not just to equality before the law, not just to dignity and agency, but to self-mastery and pleasure and adventure. This book argues that the sexual revolution, and its urgent demands for a reorganisation of care and labour, is a threat to the modern economic order. And it is a challenge to sexual repression.

This sexual revolution is a revolution in redefining terms – an exercise in taxonomy. It is about naming and nailing down the contours of a world of violent incoherence. Words matter in sexual politics. In 2018 the actress Alyssa Milano suggested

a ‘sex strike’ as a way for women to escalate the #MeToo movement – denying men sex so long as they deny the rest of us basic bodily autonomy. This was the right instinct, but the wrong strategy. A general sex strike is a stupid idea as well as a socially conservative one, given that female sexual desire is a real and active thing that requires extensive social and economic strategy to repress. Priests and politicians have been trying to squash women’s sexuality for centuries. However, one specific sex strike – the one that chauvinists are afraid of – is already well underway. A widespread adoption of consent practices *is* the ‘sex strike’ that the chauvinists are afraid of.

What has been happening, quietly and for quite some time, is women and girls opting out of the old patriarchal bargain whereby we traded our sexuality and the work of our lives for security and protection. Today, fewer women are obliged by economic necessity, social pressure, isolation or fear to enter or stay in relationships they don’t want. It’s all well and good to say that feminism is about women having choices, but what happens when we start making choices – en masse – that men don’t approve of?

What happens is a fundamental disturbance in the ‘sexual contract’, which, according to theorist Carole Pateman, is the very basis of what we think of as democratic freedom. Interrogating the idea of the Hobbesian ‘social contract’, Pateman explains<sup>23</sup> that the fundamental assumptions of Enlightenment liberation rely on an enforced power differential between men and women – an unspoken sexual contract whereby women owe men a duty of care, attention, sexual access and unpaid domestic labour. If women break the terms of that contract by refusing subservience, they deserve to be punished for it – and in the course of writing this book I spoke to countless women who have been punished for it, who carry wounds that ache in relentless reminder of the cost of non-compliance.

In order to heal injustice in the future, it is necessary to name and claim the hurts of the past. This is one of the greatest challenges when it comes to constructing cultures that value human life and building human lives that resist oppression. Most