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INVITED REVIEW ESSAY

How to Spot Faux/Enemy Feminisms

Faux feminism: Why we fall for white feminism and how we can stop. Serene Khader. Boston: Beacon Press, 2024 (IBSN: 978-0-8070-0827-0)

Enemy feminisms: TERFs, policewomen and girlbosses against liberation. Sophie Lewis. Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2025 (IBSN: 979-8-88890-272-1)

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How well is feminism serving the interests of women today? This question is given critical consideration by both Serene Khader and Sophie Lewis in their respective books *Faux feminism: Why we fall for white feminism and how we can stop* (2024) and *Enemy feminisms: TERFs, policewomen and girlbosses against liberation* (2025). Both argue that "feminist arguments and images sometimes lead to political strategies that harm women" (Khader, 7), that "we need to be discerning about any given feminism precisely because feminism is so capacious that it comprises, within itself, its own mortal enemies" (Lewis, 18). And both argue that "feminism is at a crossroads" (Khader, 16), and that a sincerely liberatory feminism must have "the courage to draw lines and fight people if necessary" (Lewis, 9). But their projects are different: Lewis's aim is to illustrate the ways in which some feminisms have "deep theoretic entwinements with fascism" by providing "a bestiary of enemy feminisms" (17); Khader's project, on the other hand, is to argue that "bad and faux feminisms … draw their force from a single idea … the idea that feminism is about freedom" (8).

Lewis's whistle-stop bestiary (or "mini-encyclopedia of Western cisfeminism," 265) begins with imperial feminism, born of a Wollstonecraftian template for feminist reasoning which supplied an "analogy to race, with macho reference to national interest, and through the posit of 'our' children's need for mother's moral authority" in the context and name of Empire (36). Next comes a critique of the elitist bourgeois feminism of the women's suffrage movement, those who—embroiled in the burgeoning field of eugenics (46)—thought they ought to receive suffrage before men of color (42-45). This is followed by the temperance suffragists' response to prostitution, framed as a "white

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slavery epidemic" of poor women needing to be "saved" from drunken and depraved working-class men and men of color (71). Then KKK feminism, which posits "the mother of the race" must be free "if whiteness is to fulfill its destiny" (95). Lewis also draws our attention to fascist feminism in interwar Britain (120): through a romanticized past of gender equity in a pre-parliamentary era and "the futuristic pro-woman radicalism of the fascist ideology" (112), former suffragettes found a truer feminist movement than suffragism ever offered (120), "a system that would ensure equal pay for equal work, abolish restrictions on married women's employment, and prioritize material support to mothers and children" (117–18)—never mind the Social Darwinism and hostility to "foreign values."

Next, Lewis decries "cop feminism" as more of the same white-lady-savior-logic constituted by the deep link "between Anglo-feminism and literal carceralism" that persists to this day (125); then there is the "pornophobic feminist," who totally misses that "objectification" is not "the central thing about capitalist gender" we should be responding to (149); the corporate and militaristic feminist, widely recognized in the figure of "the girlboss" who often hides today behind an "intersectional mask" (189); contemporary femonationalists, who are simply voicing old outrages against white womanhood (207); pro-life feminists with a "fascistic, innocence-fetishizing, messianistic mindset" born of a "radically cissexist ideology of primally coded maternalism" (219, 223), and trans-exclusionary radical feminists on a "crusade for *sex-based rights*" who long to "make women *cis* again" (238)—a "colonizing, fertility-disciplining gesture" which echoes all the enemy feminisms that have gone before (243).

Khader likewise names up some "bad" feminisms: white feminism, neoliberal feminism, lifestyle feminism, girlboss feminism, among others (6). They are "bad feminisms" because the arguments and strategies pursued tend to serve a few at the expense of many. But knowing that there are "enemy feminisms" out there does not necessarily equip us with the skills we need to spot them in the wild. So, to help us with this task, Khader urges us to first see how a specific idea has taken hold of our collective imagination—it is "the idea that feminism aims to free individual women from social expectations" or, said another way, "that feminism is about opposing barriers that hold back individual women" (8). This tacit framing of freedom has in turn shaped the way dominant feminist discourse articulates its demands, uniting a number of "seemingly disparate ideas that end up causing harm or exclusion," namely:

> that abortion is about choice, that paid work actualizes our human potential, that we shouldn't judge women, that the cultures and communities of women of color are holding them back. Freedom is also at the core of the idea that consent is sufficient for sexual liberation, and the idea that it's good to be a "strong woman", and the idea that beauty standards harm us by saying we have to conform to someone else's standards. (8)

Khader is not saying that such interpretations of feminist issues were *invalid*, but rather that they were *partial*, and their partiality has served as a bulwark to impede equitable outcomes for non-elite women.

Khader's challenge to freedom might strike a purgative impulse in the reader. Certainly we must admit that certain formulations of "freedom" cannot unburden women of oppression, but this is no reason to dump freedom as a guiding value; surely what we need is a more capacious conception of freedom! Khader's response to this challenge is a call to recognize that "feminism does not just harm women and gender-

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expansive people by preventing us from doing things and telling us what to do; it harms us by pushing us into inferior positions in an unjust hierarchy" (8). That is to say, Khader agrees that a particular formulation of "freedom" *is* the problem. But another part of that problem is that we are "in its thrall" (9); that is, we tend to lapse back into a narrow freedom framework. What we should do, instead, is reorient feminism's focus. We need to turn our attention back to the equal status of women as a social identity group. Yes, "feminist progress means that individual women are better off than they once were" (18)—typically, the most elite individual women—but "being better off isn't a feminist success if men are still reaping the benefits," as Khader contends they are (19).

The other problem with "freedom," in Khader's view, is that its mythic formulation within the collective imagination is feeding numerous other myths that are holding feminism back: the idea that sexism harms us only insofar as it restricts us ("the restriction myth"), that feminist progress can be measured by the successes of individual women ("the individualism myth"), that feminist progress means abandoning culture ("the culture myth"), and that it is "unfeminist to judge women for their choices" ("the judgement myth") (6). To each of these myths, Khader has the following to say. First, the restriction myth essentially serves the status quo by making it seem like "liberation" comes naturally from non-interference, when, in reality, non-interference only serves those who are already largely privileged. Sexism—in conjunction with other systems of oppression—sorts people into a hierarchy and devalues those cohorts who rank lowly (52). It would behoove us to remember that it is inequality between groups that is the primary wrong here, not restrictions *per se*. Second,

> Individual women being freer is not the same thing as women as a group getting closer to equality. If we call it a day when we notice that individual lives are improving, we will miss the fact that we are still nowhere near equality with men. Being better off than you used to be is also not the same thing as *all women* being better off than they used to be. In fact, your being better off might happen at other women's expense. (58)

An individualist lens obscures what we need to keep firmly in view: an assessment of how women and gender minorities are doing *collectively* (75). The question must be, "is society structurally fair when we consider the lives of women (and gender minorities) in contrast to men?" (67).

Third, Khader says we need to take a broad view of women's situation globally, including the ways in which Enlightenment values, colonialism, capitalism, militarism, and neoliberal logics shape both the ideological and material conditions of women's lives. The problem is that "Western women often can't tell the difference between trying to free other women from their cultures and spreading their own" (101). This is why Khader sees freedom feminism as white feminism in disguise; she urges us to remember that feminism can call to women in a language other than Western liberalism (102), and to see that freedom feminism actually enables women's inequity in ways that are especially detrimental to women of color (107). Women do not need to be "freed" from their culture as a precondition of exiting systems of oppression; feminisms can find their place in multiple registers. Finally, in response to the "judgement myth"—which says that "the real thing holding women back is other women's judgement" and thus we ought to respect, rather than criticize, a woman's choices (117)—Khader objects: "sexism has never been about women judging other women, and celebrating women's choices is not enough to make sexist oppression go away" (19). It is true that sometimes

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women have no genuine alternative than "to choose what sexism demands" (19), so an assessment of context is essential, but clearly we have to be able to judge those women "who are weaponizing the idea that they should be free of judgment" whilst simultaneously "harming and exploiting others" (19).

Ultimately, then, we need "a feminism that gets that hierarchy is the problem—not just restriction" (171). And luckily, Khader says, this feminism has been with us all along. It is exemplified in Kim Tallbear's, Frances Beal's, Johnnie Tillmon's, and Adriann Barboa's activism (103, 142, 160, 166), in Kimberlé Crenshaw's *intersectionality* (146), in the Combahee River Collective's statement (165), in Anita Allen's defense of abortion (153), in the teachings of Angela Davis and Audre Lorde (150, 155). Equality is possible when we commit to eliminating all hierarchies of oppression, not only sexism, but also racism, economic inequality, and imperialism (153). What we need is a feminism for the many (18, 175); this means that recentering equality—"or, if you prefer, opposition to inequality" (142)—is an urgent undertaking for a feminism that is committed to the well-being of women *as a group*, with recourse to the well-being of all others who likewise find themselves materially and symbolically denigrated within oppressive social hierarchies. And it is perhaps here that the most substantive distinction between Khader's and Lewis's texts lies. Whilst both authors seem to agree that an intersectional and coalitional feminism is the only kind of feminism that stands a chance of empowering all kinds of women, Khader directly argues for this position whereas Lewis takes it for granted.

In close, it is worth remarking on one more issue. Both Lewis and Khader consider the question of whether these "bad" or "enemy" feminisms are really *feminist* at all. Lewis says she understands the impulse to disavowal—"I know it can be upsetting to learn that feminisms have been eugenic, colonial, deadly to indigenous lifeways, explicitly antiblack, knowingly dangerous to sex workers, violent to queer and feminine people, and even, weird as it may sound, misogynistic and patriarchal" (6)—but argues that it is time to "be brave and swallow our bitter medicine" (17): we must seriously reckon with the fact that, while "feminism is necessarily central to any meaningful anti-fascism … this does not mean that it is always anti-fascist or even non-fascist" (19). *Real feminists* have created—and continue to create—obstacles to the liberation of (particularly, non-elite) women. Khader's position is substantively similar:

> The uncomfortable truth is that feminism is partly what people associated with the feminist movement do. We don't just get to decide who is and isn't a feminist based on who we do and don't like. Nor do we get to disavow the conclusions of arguments, or the imagery associated with them, once they go somewhere we didn't anticipate. (17)

They key difference is thus: Khader believes we can create a world in which bad feminisms, or "feminisms for the few," *no longer count* as feminisms (i.e., they will become "faux" feminisms). Lewis, on the other hand, seems to think enemy *feminisms* will remain. In any case, both authors agree that there are multiple feminisms at present, and that not all of them offer a liberatory project for all women; they also both seem to agree on the kind of feminism we need to pursue.

In summation, the point of Lewis's book is to illustrate that enemy feminisms have long historical roots, the enemy feminisms of today *are feminisms*, and that "knowing how to draw lines that say, this feminist is our enemy, is increasingly indispensable" (257). Khader's project is similar. She articulates the myths we fall for and why we fall for

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them; she argues that freedom feminism (and its predecessors) ought to be seen as "faux feminisms" (because they cannot bring about equality for *all* women); and that criticism of such faux feminisms is essential in the fight to make expansive gender equality a personal project. Lewis's is the book to read if you want to learn more about specific feminists' complicity—and often outright *activity*—in the oppression of multiply marginalized Others. Khader's is the book to read if you want to understand the appeal of faux/enemy feminisms and how we can avoid being beguiled by them.

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