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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

A Left Feminist Comment on Supporting Hillary Clinton

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Very little in my adult life has made me feel my feminism so strongly as the 2016 defeat of Hillary Rodham Clinton. And by "defeat," I mean her utter evisceration by the press, many Bernie Sanders supporters, the Donald Trump campaign, and a shocking number of regular Americans. The disgusting patriarchal bacchanalia that occurred during the campaign has nearly been matched by the attacks on Clinton that have continued since the election. She has been criticized even for writing a memoir of the election, *What Happened*, a book that has been variously called too long to read (Frank 2017) and an exercise in shifting responsibility (Zurcher 2017).

The Clinton candidacy was a historical milestone. Initially, I was not a fan of Hillary Clinton. This had nothing to do with the nonsense about her emails. Both Trump and Colin Powell used private email servers and very likely deleted emails. Nor was it the high fees she commanded for speeches on Wall Street. Barack Obama raised record-breaking amounts of money from Wall Street. Nor was it Benghazi, an episode for which she was fully exonerated in extensive hearings, about which she has an exhaustive and compelling summary in *What Happened*. Finally, I do not think she is "crooked." As Susan Bordo writes, "she turned out to be the most truthful of all the candidates, her record for truth telling better than that of Bernie Sanders, someone the press has never trashed for lying, even when he clearly was — about the circumstances of his visit to Rome" (2017, 109).

Rather, I was not a fan because Hillary Clinton has supported the national security state and the advancement of a neoliberal global foreign policy. In truth, after September 11, 2001, when she repeated George W. Bush's saber-rattling, unreflective sanctimony "either you're with us or you're against us," I vowed that I would never vote for Hillary Clinton for anything. My sentiments on this only deepened as she voted in favor of the USA Patriot Act and the use of force in both Iraq and

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Afghanistan, supported the use of military tribunals for accused terrorists, and, in general, gave her unequivocal support to the despicable but affable "decider" who had lied about weapons of mass destruction and created a theretofore unimaginable doctrine of the "pre-emptive strike." To me, Hillary represented some of the worst excesses of the national security state, and she was, I thought, simply neoliberalism in a velvet glove, which makes her no different than all but a tiny number of American politicians who sometimes deviate from these agendas.

I recalled, too, that she was married to a man who had been the governor of a "right to work" state and who had interrupted his presidential campaign in 1992 to return to Arkansas to preside over the execution of the mentally challenged Ricky Ray Rector. This was the same man who had ended "welfare as we know it" in 1996, effectively destroying the safety net for more than 13 million Americans (Semuels 2016). Though being married to someone does not make you identical, the Clintons have made much of their shared intellectual and political partnership. If she did not agree with Bill, neither did she publicly criticize him about any of these decisions, to the best of my knowledge.

And then there were the sexual harassment allegations, allegations she still completely dismisses in her book, writing that Trump had perpetrated an "awful stunt" by bringing "three women who had accused my husband of bad acts decades ago" to the one of the presidential debates (Clinton 2017, 138). Of Bill Clinton, she writes, "He has been my partner in life and my greatest champion since the moment we met. He never once asked me to put my career on hold for his. He never once suggested that maybe I shouldn't compete for anything — in work or politics — because it would interfere with his life or ambitions. There were stretches of time in which my husband's job was unquestionably more important than mine, and he still didn't play that card. I have never felt like anything but an equal" (160). Hillary's genuine love of Bill Clinton appears to come with a very large blind spot about his behavior with other women.

Though I understand the criticisms of Hillary Clinton both for her politics and for her unconditional support of Bill Clinton's sexual peccadillos, it is also true that there has been a profound double standard at work in the treatment of Hillary Clinton as a candidate. She has been despised and reviled not for any wrongs she has actually done but for accusations conjured to play into misogynist narratives of the unlikeable, power-hungry, conniving woman. As I have watched her repeatedly be made to atone, apologize, and grovel over things that male

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politicians routinely do, my support for Hillary Clinton has moved from begrudging acceptance to fierce alliance.

When judged by any of the measures that we customarily use to evaluate candidates, no one in the field of possible candidates for president deserved to win more than Hillary Clinton. Had she been a man, I believe she would have won. In fact, she did win. Despite the massive gerrymandering, despite the Russian hacking, Clinton still received 65,844,610 votes, almost three million more votes than Trump, and more votes than any candidate for president has ever received except Barack Obama. And it still was not enough to get her into office. Nor has it stopped people from writing and tweeting that she needs to be quiet and go away. She won 94% of black women and 68% of Latinas, who may not have voted for her because she is a woman, as Bernie Sanders implied, but rather because they did not care that she was a woman. The intersection of race and gender in 2016 is remarkable. It is as though the racism against Barack Obama combined with the misogyny against Hillary Clinton into some kind of one-two punch, leaving us with Donald Trump.

Long sections of *What Happened* are heartbreaking to read. Though Clinton does sometimes blame others (often, quite correctly), she most often relentlessly blames herself. She blames herself for Bill Clinton's loss of the governorship in 1980 because she kept her maiden name. "So I added 'Clinton' to Hillary Rodham," she writes, adding that she also "asked my friends for hair, makeup and clothing advice" (118). This is the quotidian humiliation of trying to be a female leader. She writes that it took about "600 hours or 25 days" to have her hair and makeup done during the campaign. "The few times I've gone out in public without makeup, it's made the news." She wears pantsuits, she says, because she "thought it would be good to do what male politicians do and wear more or less the same thing every day" (88).

Women are considered both too feminine and not feminine enough. Hillary writes, "Pat Schroeder ... considered running for President in 1987. She ultimately decided against it, and when she held a press conference to announce that, she cried for about three seconds. Today when you type 'Pat Schroeder' into Google, the very first suggestion is 'Pat Schroeder crying' (123). In exasperation, she asks, "Why am I seen as such a divisive figure and, say, Joe Biden and John Kerry aren't? They've run for President. They've served at higher levels of government. They've cast votes of all kinds, including someday regret, just like me. What makes me such a lightning rod for fury? I'm really asking. I'm at a loss" (120).

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Clinton has routinely been held to different standards than her male peers. It is not true, for example, that Clinton was a poor candidate because she was unlikeable. Until 2015, Gallup ranked Hillary Clinton as the most admired women in the world. She ranked higher than both Oprah and Michelle Obama. Clinton topped the list for 20 years overall, giving her the best record for any man or woman since Gallup began polling this question in 1948 (Doyle 2016; Jones 2015). When Hillary stepped down as U.S. secretary of state in January 2013 after four years in service, her approval rating was 69%, making her the most popular politician in the country (Heavey 2013; Murray 2013; O'Connor 2013). Indeed, this charge of unlikability did not come until she tried to get promoted to the highest elected office in the land (Doyle 2016).

Hillary Clinton herself has repeatedly invoked the powerful idea of the glass ceiling. It comes from a 1986 *Wall Street Journal* article that identified a late-career phenomenon affecting women. Namely, women are promoted alongside men until the point at which they can actually affect company policy (Hymowitz and Schellhardt 1986). One explanation is that the traits associated with leadership are most easily associated with maleness. Women who possess them are considered too masculine, and women who do not possess them are considered too weak. There is an extraordinary amount of data to support this, including relatively new data gathered from female-to-male transgender people. In one study in which people were interviewed before and after their transition, researchers found that the some two-thirds of the men reported that they were now viewed with more authority and competence, had greater access to workplace resources and influences, had far less need to prove their assertions, and were often given credit for points recently raised by women (Schilt 2010).

Hillary Clinton was never a leftist.[1] She is a very powerful white, privileged woman. She is also a victim of misogyny. Women are oppressed as women, and gender itself is a power construct that floats above and beside class and race as a relatively autonomous structure. Supporting a woman does not have to be qualified by her membership in another oppressed group. Indeed, even when women are part of another oppressed group (i.e., black or working class), there is a gendered dimension to the oppression. This is a point that has been persuasively argued by theorists of intersectionality. Making this point,

1. Something Bernie Sanders meant when he said she was not "progressive" — progressive being a code word the liberal left has used since the 1980s.

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Catharine MacKinnon (1987, 23) once charged that Phyllis Schlafly, an archenemy of feminism, was herself a victim of sexual discrimination, for had she been a man, MacKinnon claimed, she would surely have been awarded a cabinet appointment in the Ronald Reagan administration.

I read Hillary Rodham Clinton's book, *What Happened*, the week it came out. When it arrived, I could not put it down. I had always known that Clinton was highly intelligent, but I was surprised to find that she is also warm, funny, possessing of a professorial knowledge of feminism and women's history, and, like many of us, deeply troubled that what we are now witnessing is the very destruction of truth itself. It is an extremely impressive work. On the issue of the misogynistic and generally unfair treatment she has endured, I quote her campaign slogan: "I'm with her."

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Authenticity and Emotion: Hillary Rodham Clinton's Dual Constraints

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After the publication of *What Happened*, much attention was directed toward analyzing and commenting on a section of Hillary Rodham Clinton's book that detailed her thinking in a split-second situation during one of the presidential debates with Donald Trump. Clinton explains that during the second debate, which occurred just days after the release of the famous *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump "bragged about groping women" (Clinton 2017, 136), Trump was more or less following her around the small stage, "staring at [her], making faces" (136). She notes that it was "incredibly uncomfortable. He was literally breathing down my neck" (136). But she also considers her response to Trump's physically threatening demeanor during the debate and whether she responded appropriately or "correctly." Clinton kept her cool — she kept going in the face of what she describes as a physically menacing situation. She refused to be "rattled" by Trump's proximate presence or by the individuals he invited to sit in the audience to intimidate her.

Clinton wonders whether she should have let her anger loose during the course of the debate and, instead of remaining calm, become aggrieved and angry. She notes that she knew if she had displayed this kind of anger and irritation, it would have become an immediate attack ad directed at her,

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