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Sexual Violence and the Politics of Victimhood

The DSK case and the Assange case have brought to the fore the true ugliness of sex negative feminism and man hatred, and the extent to which they made inroads into our culture and society just as insidious as the right-wing propaganda of the Murdochs. They have also shown how those right wing forces can so easily hijack stupid blinkered man haters to the right-wing agenda.

(Craig Murray 2011)

The fact that powerful men sometimes exploit and abuse women and girls is not particularly shocking. As I write this book, the media brims with such stories, ranging from the continual speculation over the on-off and physically violent relationship between American pop stars Rihanna and Chris Brown, to the recent revelations about extensive and systematic abuse of teenage girls in 1970s Britain by DJ and television presenter Jimmy Savile and others associated with the BBC. There is a narrative of outrage in contemporary western tabloid media and popular culture around such cases, particularly those which involve the sexualization and abuse of girls. The three cases I cover in this chapter, however, are antithetical to this, characterized by contention and debate,

censure and defence. I discuss WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, both accused of sexual assault, and film-maker Roman Polanski, convicted of unlawful sex with a minor. I do not wish to rehearse the rights and wrongs of these matters: instead, my focus is encapsulated by the chapter's opening quote, taken from the blog of left-wing dissident and human rights campaigner Craig Murray. For Murray, Assange was the victim of feminist misandry, allied with a right-wing witch-hunt; Strauss-Kahn and Polanski were similarly positioned by their supporters within broader conspiratorial narratives which often eclipsed discussion of the cases themselves. I examine the support given to all three men, drawing out common themes and contextualizing these within the dominant neoliberal/neoconservative framework and prevailing political positionings and sensitivities, such as the backlash against feminism and the leftist critique of US neo-imperialist projects. I argue that these conditions of possibility framed the politicking around these cases, producing rape apologism and victim-blaming from a variety of quarters. Throughout the chapter, these case studies are used to raise questions about the constraints on sexual violence activism created by the contemporary lexicon.

(section 4 of chapter appears below)

4. Feminism, neoconservatism and sexual violence

It is often illuminating to examine the silences in political debates: in the three case studies covered in this chapter, there was very little gender commentary and a certain amount of gender essentialism mobilized on the Left as well as the Right. Supporters of all three men attempted to excuse their actions via the construction of male sexuality as somehow inevitable, reflecting neoconservative gender traditionalism as well as tapping into the neoliberal sexualization of consumer culture and possibly even the resurgence of evolutionary theory. The message was clear: powerful men have powerful urges (McRobie 2011), and, once set in train, their sexual desires are difficult if not impossible to check. Assange, it was claimed, was a man of 'strong sexual appetites' (Pendlebury 2010), and the status of both Strauss-Kahn and Polanski as infamous womanizers was thought to make their actions understandable, if not unavoidable (Evans 2005; McRobie 2011). Strauss-Kahn's wife described him as a 'seducer', informing the press that the weekend of the alleged assault in Manhattan he had already had sexual relations with three other women in preparation for his presidential bid (NewsCore 2011, cited in Fine 2012), as though promiscuity self-evidently went hand-in-hand with power. Similarly, Tracy Quan (2010) speculated that the allegations against Assange might actually contribute to his popularity and status as a 'sex symbol'.

These representations framed the idea of sexual assault as merely seduction gone awry, an assiduous myth which has been refuted repeatedly by years of feminist research and theorizing of rape as a product of gendered power relations (Cahill 2001). George Galloway, ex-leader of the UK socialist party Respect, argued that Assange's actions amounted to 'bad sexual etiquette' rather than a crime, stating, 'not everybody needs to be asked prior to each insertion' (BBC News 2012b). His comments were widely

criticized and led to the departure of his successive Respect leader Salma Yaqoob (Quinn 2012), but Galloway also received a great deal of support, including from far-left network Socialist Unity (Socialist Unity 2012). In influential left-wing political newsletter *Counterpunch*, American economist and prominent 'war on terror' opponent Paul Craig Roberts (2010) also asked: 'Think about this for a minute. Other than male porn stars who are bored with it all, how many men can stop at the point of orgasm or when approaching orgasm? How does anyone know where Assange was in the process of the sex act?' This is an example of what Adrienne Rich in 1980 (645) termed the 'penis with a life of its own' argument; taking as given the patriarchal rights of men over women's bodies and mobilizing an adolescent model of a male sex drive which 'once triggered cannot take responsibility for itself or take no for an answer' (Rich 1980: 646).

Given such regressive arguments from his advocates, it is perhaps fitting that liberal hero Assange styled himself as the victim of vengeful radical feminists. Calling the prosecutor a 'man-hating lesbian' and Sweden a 'man-hating matriarchy' (Norman 2012a), he claimed that he had fallen into a 'hornet's nest of revolutionary feminists', and that Sweden was like Saudi Arabia for men (Miriam 2010). His supporters followed suit, with Pendlebury (2010) terming one of the complainants a 'well-known radical feminist' and stating that she had been 'the protégée of a militant feminist academic', as if this somehow damaged her credibility. The prosecution lawyer was termed a 'gender lawyer', and 'malicious radical feminist' who was 'biased against men', by retired senior Swedish judge Brita Sundberg-Weitman (Addley 2011). In *Counterpunch*, the other complainant was described as a 'vengeful radical feminist' and Sweden as a 'female kingdom' (Shamir and Bennett 2010) while, on the website Justice for Assange, it was incorrectly claimed that in Sweden women had more rights than men. Tracy Quan (2010) wondered whether living in egalitarian Sweden had made Assange's accusers hungry for the 'insensitivity' he could provide. This characterization of feminism as biased, vindictive and anti-men is emblematic of the neoconservative backlash (Faludi 1992), but in this case was used by an anti-establishment figure and

his supporters, perhaps indicating the relatively precarious position of feminism at both ends of the political spectrum.

Similarly, in relation to Strauss-Kahn, Dershowitz (2011) argued that sex crimes prosecutors were agenda-driven zealots. Human rights campaigner and former diplomat Craig Murray went further to contend:

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While pejorative, this quote cites a legitimate set of concerns which has materialized around the links between radical feminism and right-wing agendas. Alongside the neoconservative backlash against feminism, there has been a rather contradictory enmeshment of some forms of feminist activism, particularly in the sexual violence arena, with crime control and the incarceration of certain groups of underprivileged men (Daly 2006). Radical feminists have advocated a host of reforms to punish gender-based crimes which have often had the unintended effect of strengthening the state's coercive power (Gruber 2009). Sexual violence is now couched almost exclusively in the language of crime, with very little attempt at more sophisticated analyses. This also informs international activism on violence against women, which is often co-opted by neoconservative rhetorics constructing other cultures as inherently violent and dysfunctional and using women's victimization as a rhetorical device to justify culturally, politically and economically imperialist projects. This has a long history, cited by Women Against Rape in their defence of Assange:

There is a long tradition of the use of rape and sexual assault for political agendas that have nothing to do with women's safety. In the south of the US, the lynching of black men was often justified on grounds that they had raped or even looked at a white woman.

Women don't take kindly to our demand for safety being misused.
(Axelsson 2010)

This marriage of radical feminist and neoconservative agendas has largely been one of convenience, and voluntary sector groups and services, in the battle to survive, frequently lack the luxury of reflecting upon their bedfellows (Bumiller 2008). However, many feminists who have instinctually seen their role as fighting against the patriarchal state have lamented the fact that feminism is now publicly and politically associated with crime control (Bumiller 2008; Gruber 2009). There are also differences between and among white and racialized women in the degree to which the state and the criminal justice system are viewed as trustworthy and effective sites for responding to violence against women (Daly 2006). The strongest critiques have come from those of the postmodern persuasion, although it could be argued that postmodern and 'third wave' preoccupations with sexual identities and empowerment, often defined in neoliberal terms, have left contemporary radical feminists with few allies (this can also be seen in anti-trafficking politics). The convergence of feminist concerns with women's victimization with neoconservative projects of social control partially explains left-wing ambivalence in relation to feminist sexual violence politics. However, this can also be seen to have produced the various forms of rape apologism seen in the three cases discussed here.

The uneasy relationship between feminism and the Left, then, is inextricably linked to the fight against neoconservatism. In the three case studies in this chapter, this was particularly apparent, with all the men positioned as victims of an overzealous US criminal justice system and their supporters styling themselves as the forces of progressiveness and freedom. This was particularly manifest in the case of Assange: his status as an anti-American hero situated him, for some of his supporters, as incapable of perpetrating sexual violence. Instead, it was claimed that he had been the victim of a CIA sting and a project to eventually extradite him to the United States to answer charges related to WikiLeaks. Supporters such as Michael Moore, Naomi Klein, Naomi Wolf, Guantanamo

survivor David Hicks and the European group Women Against Rape all made statements questioning the nature and purpose of the prosecution. Moore called the case ‘a bunch of hoey’, while American left-wing political commentator Mark Crispin Miller claimed that one of Assange’s accusers had CIA and anti-Castro ties, a rumour repeated by a number of others (Harding 2010; Miriam 2010; Pollitt 2010). In *Counterpunch*, Roberts wrote:

If reports are correct, two women, who possibly could be CIA or Mossad assets, have brought sex charges against Assange. Would a real government that had any integrity and commitment to truth try to blacken the name of the prime truth teller of our time on the basis of such flimsy charges? Obviously, Sweden has become another two-bit punk puppet government of the United States. (Roberts 2010)

This framing of the case as a matter of anti-imperial struggle eventually led to Assange being granted asylum by Ecuador on the grounds of human rights (Hughes 2012): the irony of this when set against the charges against him, as well as Ecuador’s own record on human rights and free speech, was not lost on some commentators (Braiker 2012). Following this, Assange was also offered (and accepted by proxy) an Aboriginal Nations passport in a ceremony in Sydney, with Indigenous Social Justice Association president Ray Jackson stating that the Australian government had not given the WikiLeaks founder sufficient aid (World News Australia 2012).

Polanski was also positioned as the victim of an overzealous US legal system intent on sentencing him for an ancient crime. Many of his champions stressed the arbitrariness of the attempted extradition, after 31 years of official indifference (Bennett 2010). Others went further, placing Polanski as a hero and freedom fighter against a vengeful US state (Poirier 2010). Similarly, the US legal system was interpreted as malicious and fanatical in relation to Strauss-Kahn (Ellison 2011). French commentators were particularly aggrieved at how he was treated in New York, and French media were threatened with legal action for publishing photos of him in handcuffs, with the handcuffing itself characterized by some as ‘hyper-violent’ (Willsher 2011). Former French justice minister

Elisabeth Guigou said she found the photos of Strauss-Kahn on the front page of newspapers and magazines a sign of ‘brutality and incredible cruelty’, and expressed relief that the French justice system was not as ‘accusatory’ as that of the United States (Boot 2012: 96). Christine Boutin, head of France’s Christian Democratic Party, was quoted as saying Strauss-Kahn had been trapped (Hallett 2011). A poll of the French public found that 57 per cent thought he had been framed (White 2011) by the Germans, President Sarkozy or the United States (Zoe Williams 2011a).

What is particularly interesting here is not the point that allegations against the three men had been made at politically convenient times for the United States or that, because of extraneous factors, they had been treated in a more heavy-handed way than others accused of similar crimes; it is the attendant demand that, because of this, they should be allowed to evade justice, or the assumption that, due to the surrounding politics, the accusations could not be true. As a result of this dualistic framework, three men accused of sex crimes were able to emerge as heroes for some on the western Left (Haines 2011: 28). Following the allegations against Assange, he was invited to speak at the major anti-capitalist gathering Occupy LSX (London Stock Exchange), despite the fact that many women (and more than a few men) in the Occupy movement expressed discomfort (Willitts 2011), and during his time in the Ecuadorean Embassy was invited to give video addresses to both the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, although the latter was cancelled due to technical difficulties (Chan 2013). In 2012, Strauss-Kahn was also invited to address the Cambridge Union (Eden 2012), and, though more than 750 students subsequently signed a petition asking for this decision to be reconsidered (Levy 2012), the talk went ahead (BBC News 2012a).

The assumption that left-wing men are above misogyny is contradicted by a mass of evidence, relating to the ‘old’ socialist labour movement and also to more contemporary punk and anarchist communities (Clarke 2004). Furthermore, there have recently been stories concerning sexual harassment and assault being perpetrated and swept under the carpet in various Occupy camps on both sides of the Atlantic (Forty Shades of Grey 2011;

Miles 2011; *The Scotsman* 2011). There is some evidence that, in addition to positioning gender issues as secondary to movement unity, left-wingers may tolerate sexual transgressions under the banner of 'progressiveness' (Sere 2004; Wu 2004), a trend which could be observed especially in the positioning of Polanski as the victim of neoconservative prudes, or, as French writer Agnès Poirier (2010) put it, a 'rampant moral McCarthyism'. In this case, as Bennett (2010) commented, a question of individual justice was transformed into a more general stand-off between Europeans and rednecks, sophisticates and puritans. Similarly, Naomi Wolf (2011) compared Assange to Oscar Wilde and the 'case of morals' around him, and Strauss-Kahn complained that the 'prudish' press objected to his 'libertine lifestyle', with some of his supporters suggesting that the progressive French would tolerate sexual transgressions which other women did not (Alcoff 2011; Fassin 2011). The position of morality in the contemporary political lexicon is a fascinating one, appearing to have become a right-wing preserve while left-wingers attempt to distance themselves. Unfortunately feminism, particularly the radical strand, has also become caught up in this politics as a form of sexual morality, and at times the fight against neoconservative moralism and imperialism appears to justify misogyny.