



The trouble with Deneuve

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The tired critique of #MeToo in France last week serves only to underscore why the new movement is so necessary, argues Prof. Lama Abu-Odeh.

I like the French anti-#MeToo statement signed by Catherine Deneuve and co. in [Le Monde](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html) (http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html) last week. I like it a lot. Like the “awkward” flirter whom the statement asks women to put up with, the statement itself is an “awkward” attempt to denounce the #MeToo movement that ends up being the very proof that one should exist.

That is because the statement is very clear on how the sexual freedom they defend cuts: men bother and women respond (sexual flirtation), men rub against women on the metro and women put up (what defines your morning commute). While gender-neutral pronouns were used, the implication was clear. What women put up with becomes male

entitlement and that is what sex is. This simple and “awkward” way of putting it makes the retort to the statement simple: Let *him* put up. There is no such thing as a “free” market of sex: one’s entitlement in the sexual market is the other’s un-freedom. To be left alone is my entitlement; *he* puts up. To denounce *that* as “hatred of men and sexual freedom” is part truth. The other half, of course, is that it is men who are *loath* to lose their entitlements (and hate the women who threaten them) and the whole bag of erotic goods that come with them. To lose them is to be terribly confused about sex, about one’s very gender. And if my gender as a woman was so implicated in this notion of “sexual freedom” and the whole bag of erotic goods that come with it—I am turned on by putting up—then that is cause for “sex panic,” too: panic that I may find myself left to be alone or to initiate. And that is very scary indeed.

I also like the French anti-#MeToo statement because in its “awkward” attempt to assert the French sexual difference, it is little aware of how American its discourse is. The statement’s denunciation of #MeToo uses a discourse that’s old, about three or four decades old, and very, very American. It is old to scream, “sex panic has taken over the land” every time ruling liberal feminism gears to the left of classical liberalism—where the only wrong is “violence” and “discrimination”—in making claims on behalf of women. Every time “consent” is problematized, a scream of “sex panic” is heard. And the same old things are said: it infantilizes women, it encourages the conservatives and the religious, it ignores due process, and it scares “sex” away. The statement uses all these four arguments, a script taken out of the “sex positive” movement in the US that I myself have been aware of since the late eighties.

It also does to a T what the American sex positive movement does; namely, offer a form of concession to feminism that is then quickly, hysterically, withdrawn back to “classical liberalism.” The statement asserts that it is indeed opposed to “rape” (because violent) and “abuse of power” (intolerable even though not so violent), but then proceeds to

retreat from the latter to the former by carving exceptions to the latter and then attacking feminist activism that was necessary to show the abuses that lie beyond simple "violence" condemned by classical liberalism. Why punish men who abused power decades ago? Apparently "abuse of power" has a time limit. Why punish men when they were not doing anything "different"? Apparently abuse of power is delimited by "work culture." Why punish men who meant to "flirt"? Apparently abuse of power is delimited by "intention." Aren't they making women eternal victims?

One way to think of sexual libertarian "feminism," French or American, is as the right-wing faction of ruling liberal feminism whose function is to preserve the status quo of sex and to resist any feminist attempt to redefine the gender terms of sexual interaction. Think of it as the right-wing faction of a liberal party that screams "foul" when the call for the regulation of the market by liberal members crosses the floor of "freedom" as they see as appropriate. They may concede that "corruption" of the elite is a problem with the "market" but rush to limit its meaning (statute of limitation, culture, intention). They are Blue Dog sex liberals.

It is my view that the #MeToo movement has delivered a double blow to the sexual libertarians, French and American: first, it has shown the "perversity" of their discourse and not in a good way. The revelations of sexual abuse that #MeToo has triggered, with their breadth, depth, and globality; spanning every "industry" and every corner of the globe; show only that the feminist articulation of those events is the closest to the facts as they keep presenting themselves. The libertarian reaction's perversity lies in insisting, as they have done for decades now, that it was "feminism" that made up the "facts" of sexual injury; that without "feminism" such "facts" wouldn't exist. You can peddle those ideas for some time, decades even, but the power of facts, overwhelming in their "isness," signaling to the politics closest to their "representation," will sooner or later (as now) overwhelm

you and you will start to sound hoarse, silly, mad, and perverse, even to your most loyal audience. No, it is not feminism that invented sexual injury; it was sexual injury that called for a feminist politics.

Second, the #MeToo movement has shown that the defense of “sexual emancipation” against the incursions of feminism is an “old bag.” Over the past two decades, a new order of “sex positivity” has overtaken the globe, in a manner that the “sex positivists” of the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century never dreamed of. A digitalized sexual revolution offering intensities of pleasure, if not as fact then as possibility, if not as social relation then as social expectation, has penetrated cultures far and near. For younger generations, growing up consuming its digital dictates, from Internet pornography to dating apps, sex positivity has become the pre-thought of sex itself. But it has also offered intensities of violence, assault, and social entitlement never seen before. This new sexual revolution has completely overtaken the old order, where “flirtation” is a form of pestering women put up with. Today flirting has already happened by swiping an image on an app and pausing to say “Hello” long before the two people have met. #MeToo is not an enemy of the sexual revolution of the sex app; it emerges from its very bosom. It is the young ones coming back from the world of sexual pleasure, reporting on its inequities to the adults. They demand that those inequities are fixed and they are screaming “Time’s Up.” The old ones need to pay attention lest they risk sounding absurd. Meanwhile, they need to bid the old sexual order, with its sexual libertarian discourses, goodbye.

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