

Why I Am Not a Fan of This Manifesto

BY KELLY WILZ

Jessa Crispin, *Why I Am Not a Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto*. Melville House, 2017. 176 pp. pap., \$15.99, ISBN 978-1612196015.

Many writers have announced the death of feminism and critiqued this often imperfect and ill-defined movement. Feminists within and outside the discipline of gender and women's studies have written extensively about the difficulties of coalition- and alliance-building across lines of difference; of defining what feminism "is" and "isn't" and deciding who gets to "be" a feminist; and of clearly outlining the overall goals of the movement. Jessa Crispin's *Why I Am Not a Feminist: A Feminist Manifesto* situates itself within the language and goals of second-wave radical feminism and critiques what Crispin sees as the third wave's move toward "universal feminism": a movement so accessible to everyone that it loses all meaning and purpose.

The book's central argument is that feminism's important progress toward dismantling patriarchy is undone by focusing our energy on the wrong targets and attacking individuals instead of entire systems. In Chapter 6, "The Fights We Choose," Crispin echoes critics on the right who wring their hands about political correctness and call-out culture gone mad. Using the example of Tim Hunt, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist who lost his job over what she claims was a "socially awkward man makes a 'take my wife...please' joke" that was heard by the wrong person (p. 95), she argues that one man losing his job may, in the short term, make women feel recompensed for the personal slights we've endured — particularly in STEM fields, in the workplace, and even just as we exist as "female in public" — but that in the bigger scheme of things, "responding to our own personal outrage keeps misogyny on a personal level" and "taking out one individual at a time does not decrease the amount of misogyny in the world" (p. 105).

The form of the manifesto prevents Crispin from digging deeply into any one particular argument through an academic lens and leaves her open to challenges about the intellectual importance of this work. The ways she fails to accurately define and situate terms like "toxic masculinity" and "intersectionality" matter greatly, undermining what could have been strong and salient positions. Because

she is not thoughtfully examining what these terms mean within the discipline, but instead using them to poke fun at "social justice warriors" or those who feel identity politics matter, her arguments fall short of their intentions.

For example, in discussing toxic masculinity, Crispin complains that "we refer unquestioningly to the 'problems' testosterone creates in a way we would become outraged by if men referred to the 'problems' estrogen creates," and she laments that no one talks about "toxic femininity" (pp. 71–72). This short discussion shows a complete lack of awareness of how constructed, hegemonic masculinity is situated within the context of gender and women's studies, and also of the overwhelming body of literature that refers to toxic masculinity as the set of socialized conditions placed on young men and boys that force them to fit into rigid gender roles. The biological argument that "too much testosterone" causes "boys to be boys" — that boys are "born" rapists and murderers because of their DNA — is not actually an argument feminists and intellectual critics are making! On the contrary, authors who write on constructed masculinity point to the cultural conditions and dominant ideologies we place on young boys and men, how those ideologies are constructed and reinforced, and how that biological argument represents the height of male-bashing in its presumption that men are inherently violent while women are inherently nurturing. That Crispin chooses to address this issue in such a casual and inaccurate way undermines her entire work — it suggests she isn't wrestling with academic texts in a meaningful way.

This is frustrating, because the point that taking down individuals may prevent us from addressing real systemic inequality is one we *should* seriously address. But that point is lost in Crispin's failure to define basic academic terms. Susan Faludi makes the same point with much more clarity in a recent *New York Times* piece:

If we get rid of a handful of Harveys while losing essential rights and protections for millions of women, are we really winning this thing?...If women can break the hex

that has kept them from harnessing the pure politics of personal outrage to the impure politics of society building, then maybe our Chelsey Engels and Lindsey Dislers can draw as much attention to their protest as the next actress will be critical to winning the coming battles for women’s rights: health insurance, pay equity, family planning, sexual assault, and more. The peril is that activist women won’t transcend the divide. In which case, #MeToo will continue to topple patriarchs, while the patriarchy continues to win the day.¹

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For all it appears to plead for nuance, *Why I Am Not a Feminist* offers little nuance itself. And again, because of its presentation as a manifesto, we don’t get a sense of what works the author is drawing from or whether she has done her homework at all. Andi Zeisler’s *We Were Feminists Once*² is a smart read of the intersections of capitalism and “choice feminism,” and Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist*³ wrestles with many of the critiques of feminism Crispin makes here. But Crispin’s arguments lack the nuance and clarity of either Zeisler’s or Gay’s, coming across as muddled instead of thoughtful.

Perhaps the greatest failure of Crispin’s manifesto is that it offers no solutions. As a scholar invested in productive criticism, I don’t know how yet another manifesto about the pitfalls and limits of modern feminism, by itself, can take us anywhere worth going. If call-out culture is problematic, then what *would* Crispin have us do with our legitimate anger and frustration at the systems that continue to fail us? What would be some better ways to use that time and energy? She ends the book with platitudes, asking her audience to “reclaim our imaginations” and “lay your attack at the machinery itself” (p. 150), but she offers no specific practical steps for her audience to take. Does she see power in “attacking

the machinery” through political institutions? Through education? Through disrupting social norms? None of this is spelled out in *Why I Am Not a Feminist*, and “burn it all down” isn’t a concrete strategy or plausible solution for the kind of revolution she’s calling for. Crispin’s final chapter, “Where We Go from Here” (pp. 147–151), could have channeled her critiques into realistic suggestions for action; instead, she leaves her audience with the same anger and frustration she decries as so counterproductive. For someone so critical of call-out culture and misdirected outrage, Crispin seems to be demonstrating similarly misguided energy and spirit in this book.

NOTES

1. Susan Faludi, “The Patriarchs Are Falling. The Patriarchy Is Stronger than Ever,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2017; nytimes.com/2017/12/28/opinion/sunday/patriarchy-feminism-metoo.html.
2. Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (Public Affairs/Perseus Books, 2016).
3. Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (Harper Perennial, 2014).

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