PHILOSOPHY

Objectification and Sexual Violence: Radical Feminism Revisited

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This paper reassesses Catharine MacKinnon's main claims on what generates sexual violence against women. Firstly, I show that the liberal view on gender equality does not provide an adequate answer to the difficult and pressing question of sexism and sexual violence. In fact, we are still far from the right answer if we look at the growing body of testimonies about sexual abuse and harassment shared under the hashtag 'Me too' that started in October, 2017. Based on arguments drawn from MacKinnon's work, I will argue in a second move that the radical feminist claim according to which sexual violence is mainly caused by an imbalance of power between the two genders is right. The arguments I put forward support the strong and radical belief that sexual abuse of women is not sheer individual pathology, but a consequence of the fact that men generally enjoy a dominant position in society encouraging them to objectify women.

1. Introduction

After serious accusations of sexual misconduct have been brought against Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017, the magnitude of sexual violence against women became visible at a global scale. In less than 24 hours, millions of persons from around the world have shared their experience of sexual abuse and harassment under the hashtag 'Me too' (Pasha-Robinson 2017). Such testimonies led us to understand that sexual abuse and various forms of sexual harassment against women were more or less a constant feature of our contemporary society and, more generally, of social interactions between men women. Sexual violence was always present in our world, infusing and poisoning women's lives, despite the fact that significant progress has been achieved in the area of gender equality. Sexual

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violence went overlooked and underreported for decades, even after radical feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin militated against sexual violence in the 1980s (MacKinnon 1987a, 1987b, 1989; Dworkin 1987). Starting with this assumption, I intend to review the main claims of radical feminism about the origin and causes of sexual violence, as they are articulated in the often contested work of Catharine MacKinnon, highlighting some of her views which, in my opinion, are now proven right.

Decades have passed since radical feminism was at the forefront of the gender equality debate. Since then, it became less active and less visible, as it was often considered too aggressive, too noisy, and, sometimes, even wrong in its main assumptions. The greater part of the Western societies embraced the liberal feminist assumptions as time went by, accepting and defending the view that men and women should enjoy equal rights and liberties. Feminism contributed to the optimistic view that gradually, with increased access to education and more opportunities, women would gain their rightful place in society. Although successful in many areas, I believe that the liberal paradigm has fallen short of these expectations because it did not properly address the sexual dimension of gender equality. Gender equality will never be achieved as long as sexism and sexual violence are not exposed and as long as society as a whole does not make determined efforts to deal with these phenomena according to their magnitude. I believe that radical feminism was always right on this point and that the many (successful) attempts at silencing it and the failure to tackle these sensitive issues have probably produced incalculable damage for millions of women. Women who are now speaking under the 'Me too' hashtag could have been spared the suffering, shame, and trauma they experienced in the past decades if more attention would have been paid to some of the most 'noisy' claims raised by radical feminism.

2. The social construction of gender

I intend to show in this paper that radical feminists were right in their view on the social construction of gender and on its negative effects, especially on women. Although great progress has been achieved in the area of

gender equality, women are still projected in a subordinate position through the implicit norms that regulate the type of femininity and masculinity socially acceptable. As Sally Haslanger observed, gender norms "are clusters of characteristics and abilities that function as a standard by which individuals are judged to be 'good' instances of their gender; they are the 'virtues' appropriate to the gender" (Haslanger 2012, 42). Such standards allow us to function properly in the role assigned to us in the vast complex of social relations which constitute gender. They prescribe the behaviour seen as appropriate and the attributes that any person should show if she or he wants to perform in her or his gender role. Their function is both descriptive and prescriptive. On the one side, one could assume that individuals do actually possess the characteristics presupposed by the gender norms. Therefore, some generalizations implied by the differences between women and men are, to an extent, justified. On the other side, gender norms prescribe how people should behave, what they should expect in their everyday interactions with others, and the influences they should accept or resist. The prescriptive power of gender norms comes from the fact that they are enforced by social sanctions: if someone decides to defy the norm, that person should expect that society will impose a sanction on this defiant behavior. Through this process, "conformity to our proper gender role comes to seem right and good, and perhaps most significantly, internally motivated rather than socially enforced" (Haslanger 2012, 45).

Understanding gender as a primary framework for social interaction (Răducu 2016, 15) allows us to see why generalizations of gender differences tend to justify the idea that men and women are 'naturally' or 'essentially' masculine or feminine. But

> this inference is mistaken: Even if the generalizations are accurate, their accuracy may simply reflect the impact of the norms and the pattern of social relations that underwrites the acceptance of those norms. (Haslanger 2012, 45-46)

In contrast with the essentialist view on gender, the social constructivist view highlights the prescriptive role of gender norms and the complex social arrangements that underlie our gender construction:

particular traits, norms, and identities, considered in abstraction from social context, have no claim to be classified as masculine or feminine. The classification of features as masculine or feminine is derivative, and in particular, depends on prior social classifications. (Haslanger 2012, 46)

In my view, as a primary framework, gender not only organizes but also stratifies our social life along the division it operates between individuals. Gender construction validates a power system through its deep influence felt on many levels and layers of each and every society. Gender is constructed and maintained by those who dominate and by those who are dominated as well, because both categories internalize values and norms that constitutively shape this construction. Internalization takes place in the process of personal and group identity formation, which leads to the consequence that many "foundational assumptions and ubiquitous processes are invisible, unquestioned, and unexamined" (Davis, Evans and Lorber 2006, 2). I am aware that endorsing such a view will bring me very close to what has been labelled as radical feminism. I endorse this view because I believe that the way we are socially constructed, through sometimes very rigid norms regulating masculinity and femininity passed down from one generation to another, has a strong influence on our most intimate relations, on what we deem as proper, desirable or bearable in the most various forms of gender interactions. Social construction of gender is often paving the way for many avoidable forms of injustice and harm. Understanding this process may help us see more clearly how we got here and what needs to be changed.

3. Virtues and limits of the liberal view on gender equality

The liberal view on gender, pioneered by political philosophers such as Mary Wollstonecraft or John Stuart Mill (Wollstonecraft 1993, Mill 1984) is grounded on the understanding of women and men as rational beings who, provided they have sufficient knowledge, resources and opportunities, are able to fulfil their potential as individuals, both to their own benefit and to the benefit of society as a whole. Inequalities, in this view, come from ignorance, wrong socialization, and lack of opportunities. Accordingly, inequalities can be redressed through equal access to all positions in society, and

equal treatment of all individuals, irrespective of their origin, race, religion, and gender. Efforts in reaching formal equality should be complemented with efforts towards different gender socialization. Thus, the liberal view (optimistically) encourages men to revise their perception of and behaviour towards women, to understand that gender stereotypes generally perpetuate gender injustice, to accept that violence, harassment, and exploitation are unjust and unacceptable, and to assume, as partners, a different role than the one traditionally ascribed to them. This view equally encourages women to believe in themselves, to fight to fulfil their potential as valuable and equal members of society, and to defy gender barriers and obstacles as limits that can be overcome with adequate effort and determination:

> In short, liberal feminism ultimately relies on men to be decent and fair, to become enlightened and progressive as they learn the truth about gender inequality and women's true potential, to give women their due by allowing them to participate as equals in social life, and to support this by doing their fair share of domestic work. And it relies on women to believe in themselves, to strive and achieve, to push against barriers until they give way. (Johnson 2005, 115)

In other words, formal equality doubled by efforts of individual change should be enough in ensuring, on the long term, substantive equality. But to radical feminists, this seems to be a too optimistic view of the process because of two main reasons: first of all, formal equality is described by radicals such as Catharine MacKinnon as androcentric and potentially supporting of a male-dominated social structure (MacKinnon 1987a, 42-43), accommodating some women in positions of power, provided they are male-identified, male-centred, and act according to patriarchal values (Baker 1999, 34). That is, asking women to compete with men on the standards of formal equality, we are asking them to beat men at their own game, governed by rules designed by men for themselves. In other words, instead of dismantling Lord's house (Lorde 1984) as the headquarters of injustice, the standard of formal equality asks women to dismantle its door to enter it, keeping intact the construction that grants injustice.

While it is true that formal equality has helped some women reach into positions of power and has opened many jobs to women, radical feminists

complain that, despite its appearance of gender neutrality, formal equality entitles only women who look like men to take advantage of the rules and practices worked out by and for men (MacKinnon 1987a, 37). In the real world, however, women do not look like men, in terms of responsibilities. Formal equality gives women the right to compete with their male colleagues with wives under the rules and practices worked out by and for men with wives, that is, regardless of the differences between their domestic responsibilities and those of their male colleagues (MacKinnon 1987a, 37).

The second reason why formal equality seems to be a too optimistic view, and possibly misleading, is that the liberal focus on the individual may obscure the power of the social systems. The male privilege looks as if it were an individual problem only remotely connected to larger systems that promote and protect it. (Johnson 2009, 115) According to this view, women must often negotiate from a position of weakness, depending on men to give up male privilege and embrace activities (such as childcare or domestic work) which may not offer them the rewards valued by the culture they live in:

> ...this misses the fact that when men don't do their 'fair share' of domestic labour, they gain in terms of nondomestic rewards such as power, income, and status as 'real men'. In the dominant patriarchal culture, these rewards are valued far more highly than the emotional satisfactions of family life. In opinion polls, many men *say* that family life is more important than work, but when it comes to actual choices, about where to invest themselves, the result reflects a different set of cultural values embedded in powerful paths of least resistance (Johnson 2009, 115).

Additionally, efforts towards a different gender socialization advocated by the liberal paradigm (including, but not limited to rewriting textbooks and curricula, teaching boys and girls to see the negative impact of gender stereotyping, and teaching boys to treat girls with more respect and become better partners in their future families) are permanently hampered by the fact that they take place within the existing social institutions which are designed in a way that perpetuates gender inequality. Radical feminists stress that gender norms and gender stereotypes do not exist in a vacuum; they are imposed and perpetuated in the family, in school, at the workplace and virtually in all contexts that presuppose social interaction. According to them,

the question is not how we raise our children to fit into the world, but how to change the world where our children will find their place, feeling at the same time compelled to fit in, if they want to have successful lives.

Consequently, radical feminism calls for a different construction of society, in which women are not only granted the right to participate as men's equals in society, but also the power to shape the alternatives from which both women and men may choose:

> It's about the power to change society itself. It's about fundamentally chang-
> ing the Master's house, if not dismantling it altogether, which is a far cry from
> just getting in the door. This goes well past the limits of liberal feminism to
> the roots – the radicals – of the patriarchal tree (...) (Johnson 2009, 119).

4. The needed complement to the liberal view: Radical feminism on sexism and sexual violence

I strongly believe that, as much admirable progress has been achieved so far in our liberal societies in terms of women's rights, there is still one manifestation of male dominance which remained intact, and that is sexism with its correlative, sexual violence. Despite the fact that every decent person virtually rejects and condemns manifestations of sexism and sexual violence, little has been done in our society to understand their harmful effects on women. If sexism and sexual violence are so pervasive in society, as it has recently come to light, can we continue to treat them as isolated incidents perpetrated by deviant individuals? My answer to this question is negative. As a matter of fact, sexism and its distressing consequences seem to be a systemic feature of our modern Western societies (to focus only on this part of world). That is why I chose to defend radical feminism as a powerful resource to challenge our ordinary understanding of gender and gender relations and to draw our attention to the unjust social arrangements which facilitate sexual violence against women. For radical feminism,

> misogyny and other forms of sexist thinking are more than mistaken ideas
> and bad attitudes. They are also part of a cultural ideology that serves male
> privilege and supports women's subordination. As such, a sexist attitude is

more than mere prejudice: it is prejudice plus the power to act on it. (Johnson 2005, 122)

In order to change existing social arrangements that perpetuate sexism and sexual violence, individual change is necessary but not sufficient. Awareness of the underlying, societal causes of such a broad phenomenon and the urge to change those arrangements which perpetuate it might sound radical, but might as well be the only way to achieve substantive gender equality. While the liberal paradigm was the first successful step in the long journey to achieve this goal, I am afraid that it did not succeed in taking us as long as we need in eradicating gender injustice and women subordination.

In the remainder of this paper, I will consider some of the main claims of radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon. I agree with her strong belief that sexual violence is more than a matter of individual pathology, as one could claim from a liberal position. Sexual violence is certainly and in the first place "a path of least resistance that patriarchy lays down for men to follow and for women to accept" (Johnson 2005, 120). From a radical perspective, this path doesn't exist in isolation from the rest of the social life. Instead, it is rooted in and helps to maintain the male privilege within the social system.

Catharine MacKinnon's views are paramount on this subject because "her work is deeply grounded in the commitment never to lose sight of the terrible concrete reality of sexual violence against women" (Haslanger 2012, 58). Few feminist philosophers assumed this commitment as she did. This makes her an outstanding presence in the history of feminism. If one wonders why her views have been, at times, so strong, I shall say that, on the topic of sexual violence against women, one can hardly be otherwise than radical. Her gender theory is based, in essence, on three main assumptions: 1. Gender is defined and established relationally; the relations organizing gender are, by definition, hierarchical, placing men in a dominant and women in a subordinate position. Women are not randomly assigned with the subordinate position. Their gender is constructed to fit in this position as it is requested by the very relation of dominance, i.e. not in virtue of a sexual difference but in virtue of a postulated hierarchy between men and women.

2. Gender relations are 'dictated' by those placed in the dominant position, i.e. men. This happens obviously to the benefit of those placed in this position. And 3. Gender is 'sexualized', i.e. women are 'constructed' as a subordinate category according to their sex/sexuality, along with all the other categories that create unequal relations in society, such as race, class, etc. Therefore gender is the ultimate ground of inequality, the foundation on which all other inequalities build up: "Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualisation of inequality between men and women." (MacKinnon 1987a, 6)

MacKinnon grounds her dominance theory on the assumption that gender relations are power relations and she offers an alternative to the mainstream view on how gender relations were established. According to her view, gender differences do not come first in this process, as primary data that function as causes leading to necessary and inescapable social structures and gender interactions. On the contrary, they are effects prompted by the different distribution of power between women and men. In this understanding, the connection between gender differences and unequal power is reversed. She claims that some originally produced unequal distribution of power, presumably obtained by force, establishes or generates gender differences, as a way to confirm the place of women as a subordinate class and to further maintain the achieved distribution of power.

She gives the genesis of our gender system a strong, illustrative, and compelling description:

> ... on the first day that matters, dominance was achieved, probably by force. By the second day, divisions along the same lines had to be relatively firmly in place. On the third day, if not sooner, differences were demarcated, together with social systems to exaggerate them in perception and in fact, because the systematically differential delivery of benefits and deprivations required making no mistake about who was who. Comparatively speaking, man has been resting ever since. (MacKinnon 1987a, 40)

This was possible because society tacitly undertook masculinity as the standard against which women were judged:

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> Men's physiology defines most sports, their needs define auto and health in-
> surance coverage, their socially designed biographies define workplace expec-
> tations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define
> quality in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit, their ob-
> jectification of life defines art, their military service defines citizenship, their
> presence define family, their inability to get along with each other – their wars
> and rulerships – defines history, their image defines god, and their genitals de-
> fine sex. (MacKinnon 1987a, 36)

This system places women in an unequal position twice: first, when
the system was originally designed and second, when they are asked to com-
pensate for all the differences implied by their subordinate position, to strive
and meet all standards imposed by men, in case they want to reach an equal
social statute. Therefore, the question arises:

> Why should you have to be the same as a man to get what a man gets simply
> because he is one? Why does maleness provide an original entitlement, not
> questioned on the basis of its gender so that it is women (…) who have to
> show in effect that they are men in every relevant respect, unfortunately mis-
> taken for women on the basis of an accident of birth? (MacKinnon 1987a, 37)

For MacKinnon, the core of discrimination is the systemic translation
of differences between women and men into advantages for men and disad-
vantages for women (Backer 1999, 36). The major cause of inequality is the
eroticization of women's subordinate status. Her theory focuses, therefore,
on how men's power over women is exercised through the construction of
sexuality:

> Sexuality (…) is not a discrete sphere of interaction or feeling or sensation or
> behavior in which preexisting social divisions may or may not be played out. It
> is a pervasive dimension of social life, one that permeates the whole, a dimen-
> sion along which gender occurs and through which gender is socially consti-
> tuted (…). Dominance eroticized defines the imperatives of its masculinity,
> submission eroticized defines its femininity. (MacKinnon 1989, 130)

For MacKinnon, male domination over women is achieved through
sexuality which is a construct of male power: defined by men, forced on
women and constitutive in the meaning of gender (MacKinnon 1987b, 67).

As evidence for this claim, she points to the widespread male sexual abuse of women, doubled by the widespread tolerance of such abuse. In conclusion, the eroticization of women's inequality, for women as well for men, is "the mainspring of gender inequality" (Baker 1999, 37).

As radical as it is, MacKinnon's approach sounds compellingly because it highlights the intimate relation between gender violence and inequality. Her dominance approach is inspired by real-life experiences, which were barely acknowledged publicly back in the 1980s, as well as nowadays. MacKinnon's purpose was to offer a theoretical background for legal action in cases of rape, sexual abuse on women, domestic violence, prostitution, and pornography. Her main argument is that such blatant injustices tend to get overlooked because they are experienced almost exclusively by women. An understanding of gender relations as power relations would provide an opportunity to modify the mainstream approach on gender equality and has a better chance to redress inequality and injustice:

> Because this treatment is done uniquely to women, it is implicitly treated as a difference, the sex difference, when in fact it is the socially situated subjection of women. The whole point of women's social relegation to inferiority as a gender is that for the most part these things aren't done to men. Men are not paid half of what women are paid for doing the same work on the basis of their equal difference. Everything they touch does not turn valueless because they touched it. When they are hit, a person has been assaulted. When they are sexually violated, it is not simply tolerated or found entertaining or defended as the necessary structure of the family, the price of civilization, a constitutional right. (MacKinnon 1987a, 41)

All these situations describe the systematic relegation of an entire category of people to a condition of inferiority. This unfair treatment is political and deeply grounded in the structure of society:

> This social status in which we can be used and abused and trivialized and humiliated and bought and sold and passed around and patted on the head and put in place and told to smile so that we look as though we're enjoying it all is not what some of us have in mind as sex equality. (MacKinnon 1987a, 41-42)

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Bearing in mind MacKinnon's claim that gender roles and their correspondent positions in society are socially constructed, the answer to gender inequality is simple, though not so easy to achieve. What is socially constructed can be deconstructed though common will and action based on a better understanding of the way our society is constituted. She never asked for men to be banned from positions they rightfully hold in society. She never demanded to design a society in which gender differences are abolished in order to reach gender uniformity and to eradicate femininity (Macklem 2003, 73-74). Her approach was radical, but far less radical than her critics claimed. She asked for a different construction of society, a process that was supposed to take into account the interests and dignity of every individual. Such a process implies a reassessment of the standards against which we are judged, a recalibration of social interactions and a redesign of the social institutions that perpetuate dominance.

Her main goal was to challenge the liberal public/private division and show that the private sphere was home for women's oppression until society started to legally address the injustices sheltered there. My reading of Catharine MacKinnon's approach is this: she believed that a strong philosophical justification for the necessity to redress the injustices that take place in the private sphere requires the identification of those factors that have generally enabled and justified oppression. These factors had to be conceived as common to both private and public sphere. Were these factors conceived as determinant either for the private or the public sphere, that is, were they kept separate, one cannot justify legally binding intervention in matters pertaining to the private sphere. What she really wanted was to justify that *the personal was political*. In other words: sexual submission of women is universal and generalized; it is, according to all standards, unjust and grounds the actual system of male domination. Consequently, if the foundation of the actual system is wrong, we have every reason and legitimacy to challenge and replace it. MacKinnon underlines that:

> women share isolation in the home and degradation in intimacy. The private sphere, which confines and separates women, is therefore a political sphere, a common ground of women's inequality. (...) For women, epistemically and daily, the private necessarily transcends the private. If the most private also

most 'affects society as a whole,' the separation between public and private collapses (...). (MacKinnon 1989, 193)

In the light of this claim, the motivation of her theoretical approach becomes intelligible: the public/private distinction justifies different legal mechanisms for each sphere. Legislation takes for granted that women and men are equal within the private sphere; but, in fact, they aren't:

> Through this perspective, the legal concept of privacy can and has shielded the place of battery, marital rape, and women's exploited domestic labor. It has preserved the central institutions whereby women are deprived of identity, autonomy, control, and self-definition. (MacKinnon 1989, 194)

If I correctly understand her arguments, I think that it's obvious that her radicalism was not motivated by hate towards men – the 'most convenient' rejection of radical feminists depicts them as 'men-haters' – but by her infinite compassion towards women. I can understand her motivation, and I am compelled to accept (especially in the light of the recent exposure of the magnitude of sexual violence towards women in our Western, civilized world) that the social construction of women puts them in a subordinate position and facilitates their sexual objectification. In a Kantian understanding, the existing inequality between women and men, which is constructed and not given, is intimately linked to and makes room for objectification. The actual imbalance of power between genders makes it easier for the strong to objectify the weak, for the powerful to treat the vulnerable as instrument, depriving some of us of the dignity inherent to our humanity (Kant 1996, 209).

In MacKinnon's words, in virtue of their gender, women are socially constructed as objects of male sexual desire and valued exclusively on the basis of their physical attributes, which can be sexually used by men, thus being deprived of their own humanity:

> To be sexually objectified means having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used, according to your desired uses, and then using you that way. Doing this is sex in the male system. (MacKinnon 1987a, 140)

Sexuality, be it male or female, is socially influenced: men are not naturally inclined to objectify women and women are not naturally inclined to be submissive. On the contrary, women are socially conditioned to accept a submissive role as inherent to their nature, in a society which encourages men, through practices such as pornography, to find women's submission sexually appealing (Răducu 2016, 148-151, 173-175). Dominant ideas, social practices, media images and even social institutions implicitly condone sexual violence against women by normalizing or trivializing it and sometimes by blaming survivors themselves.

MacKinnon made constant use of these claims in order to reform legislation in crucial areas like sexual harassment and sexual violence. I am not alone to find it disappointing that, despite the fact that her radical arguments intensified legislative progress, her radicalism is now denounced:

> It is a curious feature of feminism today that one repeatedly encounters women who denounce MacKinnon and Dworkin as man-haters but who gladly enjoy, and even take credit for, the legal reforms that were made possible only through concepts they introduced. Dworkin and MacKinnon are radicals, but their radicalism has proven broadly acceptable, in large part because they call a culture based on rights and equal dignity to full consistency with itself. (Nussbaum 1999, 246)

5. Conclusion

The terrible amount of sexual violence exposed in 2017 makes it harder for anyone to accept that sexual violence is nothing but a sum of individual, separate acts perpetrated by psychically and mentally imbalanced people. There is imbalance here, but not of sexual, psychical or physical kind. It is, in my opinion, an imbalance of power which has never been properly addressed and which encourages men, in virtue of their dominant position in society, to use and abuse, and, consequently, to trivialize and humiliate women. And this is at least partly because our society never went through the radical process of reassessing the standards against which women are judged and of deconstructing their socially constructed image as sexual objects, a process urged by feminist Catharine MacKinnon three decades ago.

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