

# Book Review

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JUDITH LEVINE and ERICA MEINERS, *The Feminist and the Sex Offender: Confronting Sexual Harm, Ending State Violence*. London: Verso, 2020, pp. 1-213, ISBN: 9781788733403, £14.99 (Pbk).

*The Feminist and the Sex Offender: Confronting Sexual Harm, Ending State Violence* (Levine and Meiners, 2020) is a powerful, reflexive and much needed abolition feminist critique of carceral responses to sexual and gender violence and how feminism should support us in transcending ineffective, racialized criminal legal responses and institutions. The authors, Judith Levine and Erica Meiners, provide a deep analysis of the frequently peripheralized relationship between feminism, sexual and gender violence, and the intersectional harms perpetuated by the carceral state. Their timely account is formed in view of the #MeToo movement and the retributive and narrow legal terrain within the context of the sexual offences regime in the United States.

The authors provide a nuanced abolition feminist analysis of the sexual offences legal regime in the United States. They define abolition feminism as:

A melding of anti-racist prison abolitionism – which is part of the Black radical tradition – and feminism. It grows out of the recognition of the shared ideologies that undergird state violence and interpersonal gender violence and the official and cultural conflation of vengeance with justice. (p. 183)

By outlining this early in the book, they build on works by authors such as Incite! (2001) and Angela Davis (2013) and they set the pace for the rest of the text.

Levine and Meiners divide their book into four central parts that are comprised of multiple short chapters: Part I: Feminists Confront Sexual Harm, Part II: State Violence: The Sex Offense Legal Regime, Part III: Fractured Resistance, and Part IV: Ten Ways to Confront Sexual Harm, End State Violence, and Transform Our Communities. The first three sections provide a holistic critique of feminist responses to sexual and gender violence, the historical and contemporary sexual offences legal regime in the US context, and broader resistance strategies against structural harm. Their thorough critical discussion is followed by the final section, Part IV. This final section interweaves all of these sections and offers a number of practical, timely and important recommendations to support us in collectively healing and moving forward in building communities that are free of coercive and shaming institutions; such as the sexual offences legal regime. It draws together a variety of diverse initiatives that are rooted in the principles of transformative justice. By sharing and outlining these approaches, the authors encourage

readers to reimagine our communities and to help ‘build other possibilities’ that enable us to authentically confront gender, sexual harms and the intersecting harms generated under the carceral state (p. 158). In essence, they create an important moment for disruption in the mainstream anti-violence discourse and praxis.

In line with abolition feminist thinking, the authors openly discuss the complexity and tensions involved in dismantling a system as deeply rooted as the sexual offences legal regime:

None of the ideas proposed here are blanket solutions. We don’t believe those exist. Neither is any of them top-down change or an overnight conversation. Change requires collective thought and action so we expect conflict. We, and the people whose work we applaud, are in it for the long haul, so we expect periodic fatigue. (p. 158)

As part of their critical analysis of the regime and their consideration of potential avenues forward, Levine and Meiners interweave a selection of interviews, legislation, case studies, statistics, and abolition feminist and transformative justice initiatives that support their central objective to dismantle the sexual offences legal regime. Their effective use of these materials also enhances the accessibility of the book.

Levine and Meiners (2020) support the abolition of the sexual offences legal regime in the United States, while still meaningfully engaging with the multi-layered trauma that many survivors of gender and sexual violence experience. They ensure that readers understand that the objective to abolish this system is not at odds with the need to address serious trauma and harm. In fact, they demonstrate that dismantling these systems constitutes a vital part of our collective feminist accountability, healing and trauma strategies. The authors recognize that accessing justice for gender and sexual violence in the authentic sense lies in actively taking steps to put an end to interlocking systems of harm and oppression, especially those systems underpinned by the patriarchy and white supremacy:

Interpersonal violence and the violence inflicted by the state are not opposing actors in a moral or political war. Rather the abuser or rapist and the criminal legal system are a team, the former the bad cop, and the latter the good. They speak in unison . . . getting rid of punishment would be a great blow to the power of the patriarchy, as well as that of white supremacy. (p. 5)

Levine and Meiners reinforce the reciprocity between our collective safety from violence and our ability to engage in sexual liberation and pleasure. They contend that our freedom from violence and freedom to experience pleasure are contingent on re-envisioning healing and accountability practices that de-centre the carceral state. By clarifying the connection between safety, pleasure and liberation, the authors build on recent work by Adrienne Maree Brown who considers our ability to experience pleasure, justice and liberation as being interdependent (Brown, 2019: 20).

Throughout the book, the authors centre their conversation on the relationship between gender and sexual violence, feminism, and the anti-carceral movement. This is in support of the broader abolitionist objective to eradicate gender and sexual violence

and to actualize safety, accountability and sexual pleasure in our everyday lives. Importantly, by centring on this complex area they disentangle a nexus that has been historically positioned as an unquestionable paradox in more mainstream feminist discourses. Drawing on Beth Ritchie's work (2014), the authors effectively depict the division within the feminist movement as a key stumbling block for the anti-violence movement, particularly in terms of gender and race:

... anti-violence feminists could be roughly divided into two factions: those who want to put abusers and rapists in prison and those who want to abolish prisons and find non-punitive, nonviolent responses to harm. Both groups want to end sexual and gender violence. And both want individuals who do harm to be held accountable and those who have been harmed to be heard and helped to heal... But unlike the other contingent, their ["carceral feminists"] politics join the struggle against sexual and gender violence with that against the "white supremacist prison nation." (pp. 12–13)

By mapping the recent history of feminist anti-violence approaches in the United States; including approaches by the New York Radical Feminists and the National Black Feminist Organization, Levine and Meiners illuminate the inseparable relationship between carceral responses to gender and sexual violence and race (pp. 21–24). In doing so, they build on earlier contributions by the Combahee River Collective (1979) and Angela Davis (1990). The authors reinforce the intersection between carcerality, gender, race, class and ability through the contemporary lens of the #MeToo movement. As such, they extend an opportunity for feminists who support anti-racism, but who continue to attach value to carceral responses to reflect on their role in perpetuating injustice and maintaining these harmful, punitive systems. The significance of this opportunity for collective reflection is especially important during the current chapter of Black Lives Matter movement. By centring the foundation of the book around these contemporary struggles that are rooted in history, the authors reinvigorate Angela Davis' (1990) analysis of earlier anti-violence feminist movements with further depth and a renewed sense of urgency:

The failure of the antirape movement of the early 1970's to develop an analysis of rape that acknowledged the social conditions that foster sexual violence, as well as the centrality of racism in determining those social conditions, resulted in the initial reluctance of Black, Latina, and Native American women to involve themselves in that movement. (Davis, 1990: 45)

Simultaneously, they effectively outline the promise of abolition feminist ways of addressing gender and sexual violence that authentically engage with the complexity of trauma and transcend the shortcomings of the individualized and racist carceral state:


We think that the restorative and transformative processes are more compatible with the realities of sexual relations than the guilty-or-innocent criminal model, and more likely to achieve real accountability and change a harm-doer's attitudes and behaviour. (p. 28)

Throughout the book, the authors opt to use the pronoun 'she' when referring to survivors of gender and sexual violence and 'he' to indicate a person or people who have committed harm or violence (p. 8). While this may initially provoke a sense of discomfort for some readers, by taking this approach, the authors expose the gendered power relations underpinning gender and sexual violence. This is something that is often concealed in more mainstream legal analyses. They do not claim that all gender and sexual violence is experienced by women and committed by men. Rather, they take this approach to encourage readers to engage with the reality faced by many people and to consider the more historical and contemporary relationship between sexual violence and gender.

The book contributes to a growing body of abolition feminist scholarship that re-centres gender and sexual harm within the anti-violence and abolitionist movement. Levine and Meiners develop recent works by authors including Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Angela Davis (2020), Avery F Gordon (2020) and Adrienne Maree Brown (2019) whose collective works seek to dismantle the carceral state in order to properly address the structural nature of violence, oppression and marginalization. The authors make a rich addition to this field of activism and research by focusing on the intersecting relationship between nature of carceral responses within the specific context of gender and sexual violence.

While this book is US centric, the value of the text transcends this immediate context. For example, the authors' discussion of the Violence Against Women Act in the United States mirrors Lola Olufemi's (2020) recent analysis of similar legislation in the UK legal context (p. 25). Most importantly, Levine and Meiners' book stages an important interruption in mainstream anti-violence work that continues to centre the carceral state, despite the reproduction of harms based on gender, race, class and ability. The publication of this book comes at a vital time for all communities who are coming together to address intersecting and global crises.


The Feminist and the Sex Offender is a bold and provocative book that breathes new life into the fields of feminism, abolition and anti-carceral studies. The authors seize the opportunity to cultivate a more capacious anti-violence, feminist discourse and praxis in the contemporary context that accords proper attention to intersectionality and the carceral state. Simultaneously, they equip those who continue to promote the use of individualized and racialized responses to violence with a lifeline. The value and scope of this book extends far beyond the broader focus of this review. The book bears relevance across the curriculum and beyond the parameters of formalized education. It should be embedded into our sociological, political, criminological and criminal legal syllabus' to support and enable the uncomfortable, yet fundamental conversations around gender and sexual trauma and to challenge our collective notions of justice, accountability and healing. Feminists and abolitionists alike, myself included, should grasp the gift provided by Levine and Meiners and continue to add stitches to this tapestry. After reading this book, I look forward to the upcoming book, by Davis et al. (2021), *Abolition. Feminism. Now.*

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