

## NOTE FROM THE FRONT LINE

### Commentary on the struggle over abortion in the USA

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#### ABSTRACT

This short paper considers the implications of the anti-abortion movement as part of a larger historical project of male domination, domination of nature, and exploitation of labor. It emphasizes how the attempt to control the mother and her body represents both denial of dependency and the split off defense of the vulnerable self projected into the symbol of the fetus. The refusal to accept the knowledge of one's own harming, colonial-racist exploitation, is perversely bolstered by putting the onus of harming onto the other.

**KEYWORDS:** anti-abortion movement; women; control; colonial-racist exploitation; onus of harming

In the late 1980s when we were only knee deep, not up to our nose, in the treacherous stream of abortion politics, I wrote about its symbolic significance in *The Bonds of Love* (Benjamin, 1988). Frankly indebted to de Beauvoir (1949) and her radical statements about the difficulty of recognizing the Other, it also drew on a critical reading of Freud's (1930) insistence that repudiation of the feminist is an indissoluble bedrock of the male psyche. I focused not only on how the mother and her maternal qualities are repudiated to form male identity, but how the aim of controlling the mother as an object distorts all social relations (Benjamin, 1988).

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The fear of women's power to create and nurture life, I argued (following the less well-known Dorothy Dinnerstein [1976]), is the real bedrock, for this is experienced as the power of life and death. For women to claim that power as their own was a great threat.

It was clear that the anti-abortion movement expressed and stirred up this fear of maternal power, while offering men the means to master and control that power. At the same time, in a clever move of synthesizing opposites much used by fascists, women as mothers were idealized and birthing children glorified. Today, having reached greater strength than we could have imagined, the suppression of women's rights to control their bodies has been joined with white supremacist ideology, 'The Great Replacement', advocating birthing children to increase the white nation.

What appeared at the time as an obvious backlash against feminism, simultaneously exalting the cowboy Reagan as the tough male individualist, signified more than was obvious, as did the movement it was trying to crush. A motive visible beneath the surface of this 'conservatism' was an equally dark intention not to conserve but to exploit the other—another repudiation of human dependency upon and lack of control over the mother. It is no stretch to see the link between the fight for deregulation of industry with the determination to control women's bodies: the belief in the unabridged right to mastery, dominion over every living thing. Male mastery should be unlimited by any social or natural force and all nature was regarded as thing.

It is easy to see that design, not coincidence, inspired the merging of this political movement purporting to restore a traditional way of familial life with a purportedly 'free market' neoliberal strategy of allowing economic action without modulation by government. However, what about protecting the vulnerable fetus? Was that not somehow at odds with all the moves to remove established social protections from capitalist exploitation? This would seem to be a successful use of splitting the parts of self that cannot be accommodated by the master, which are split off and projected into the Other or into symbolic entities. The knowledge of causing harm to the vulnerable is repudiated and the onus of harming is put onto the other. In this case, the vulnerability of all beings is concentrated into the poor fetus who has no other home or source of life than the woman who carries it. The fetus is protected by controlling that woman—the one who harms. This accomplishes two aims at once: restoring mastery by asserting independent invulnerable male power and symbolically protecting the actual unavoidably dependent self. Furthermore, the male hatred of weakness and of women is concealed by this assertion of protection. While the economic aim of exploitation is furthered by the actual refusal of resources for care or nurturance for these subordinated handmaids and their living offspring, women are now to be punished: it is a woman's burden to manage as best she can unless she acquiesces to dependency on the exploiting male.

*The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985) combines with *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/1972)—mastery over women and over nature? Here, what is split off and denied is the voracious need to devour and exploit the mother who is often idealized as 'the giving tree' as in Shel Silverstein's chilling myth (Silverstein, 1964). When every use of the live tree is exhausted, it gives gratefully of its wood. In any case, the child (male) is never to feel compassion or gratitude for the organisms that nurture him—not leaf, not human. This so-called freedom—permission to exploit—was more recently challenged by the vociferous action of the #MeToo movement. In parts of the USA, consciousness has truly been raised. Even ordinary politicians on the Democrat (if not to say left) side of the spectrum speak of the issue of controlling women's bodies as well as the disproportionate effect on women of color. However, it is up to those with a radical perspective that see the continuity in these issues of class and sex oppression to make certain crucial links between the abortion struggle and the struggle to protect the human habitat from unchecked extraction by the forces of capital.

The unholy alliance of male dominion over women and nature encapsulated within an economic system that allows ruthless exploitation of those who labor is not difficult to trace in American history. The violence with which it was maintained is resurgent in the violence of today's white supremacists. Nor is this third point on the triangle—racial capitalism is one name for it—hidden in the political movement that combines anti-feminism with climate denial. Even as this movement refuses women freedom to own their bodies and refuses to bow to the global consequences of exploiting nature, it defends the American Southern Confederacy and human enslavement. Even as it denies the right to own the products of one's labor, it idealizes the past enslavement of a whole people. It not only opposes all social institutions that protect those who labor and those whose past exploitation have robbed them of wealth, it actively vilifies those who would acknowledge and counteract this history of predation and degradation; it holds high the banner of this legacy, and champions its current form of impunity for those who exploit.

It has long been observed that the rejection of our interdependency with all living beings and propensity for exploitation are branches of the same tree. However, we might need to give greater credence to the way these malignant tendencies to degrade and control are not simply opportunistically related, they are fused in the depths of patriarchal psychology. To return to an argument I proposed all those years ago, it is misleading to sum up this propensity for domination as human nature, as with the famed expression 'man is a wolf to man', which found its psychological reiteration in Freud's (1930) famous treatise on civilization. Freud believed that our instinctively rooted aggression meant that ultimately only repression of aggression, and indeed paternal authority, could limit such predation. As feminists, I said, we see another way: the demand for our liberation is the demand for mutual recognition, that is, the rejection of authority in favor of equality sets the limit to the omnipotent claims of the presumed subject, the master. With this demand we assert—and strive to put into practice—

that we are not dependent on the master for recognition, rather all are equally dependent on one another. It is only this recognition of the Other, her rights and needs and equivalent center of being, that sets a limit to predation by those who assume their position as subject to be a fact of nature. Respecting this limit, we serve not the master but those facts: we reverse the ideology of 'land' that is owned and subjugated in favor of the earth.

Yet to establish our power to realize the claim of mutuality requires a radical struggle against the well-organized forces that defend arbitrary power. This demand for recognition of all living things must be embodied in a We: that is, both as a We who know our common condition as dependent humans, as well as a We who speak for whatever disempowered or exploited group we represent. This struggle asserts the difference the Other can make, and we are now engaged in this battle as we defend our common humanity and the requirements of human life on earth.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



**Jessica Benjamin** is best known as the author of *The Bonds of Love* (Pantheon, 1988), which brought a feminist intersubjective perspective into the psychoanalytic field, and of the article 'Beyond Doer and Done To: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness' (2004), the basis for her recent book *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third* (Routledge, 2018). This book emphasizes the importance of acknowledgment in therapeutic interaction and in relation to trauma, especially collective historical trauma. In addition, she is the author of *Like Subjects, Love Objects* (Yale University Press, 1995) and *Shadow of the Other* (Routledge,

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