

The Kavanaugh nomination, #MeToo and the politics of petty bourgeois rage

By David Walsh
3 October 2018

Recently the *New York Times* published an opinion piece by journalist Rebecca Traister headlined “Fury Is a Political Weapon. And Women Need to Wield It.” It centers on the competing testimonies of Christine Blasey Ford and Judge Brett Kavanaugh, Donald Trump’s nominee for the US Supreme Court, at the September 27 Senate Judiciary Committee hearing. Ford has accused Kavanaugh of sexually assaulting her in the early 1980s.

Traister’s piece is one of a number of books and articles along the same lines that have appeared in the past weeks and months. The books include Soraya Chemaly’s *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger*, Gemma Hartley’s *Fed Up: Emotional Labor, Women and the Way Forward* and Traister’s own *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger*.

Among the numerous articles, some of them devoted to the Kavanaugh-Blasey Ford controversy, are: “Women, we must embrace our anger,” Clementine Ford, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 2; “Why women’s rage is healthy, rational and necessary for America,” Carlos Lozada, *Washington Post*, September 27; “Women’s Rage Is the Most Powerful Engine of 2018,” Stephanie Zacharek, *Time*, September 24; “Finally, angry women are the solution and not a problem—but we still have far to go,” Emilie Pine, *Guardian*, September 24; and “All the Best New Books and Films Are About Female Anger,” Brianna Kovan, *Elle*, September 10.

The Democratic Socialists of America, ordinarily one of the most tepid and mild-mannered of left-liberal organizations, has announced a “week of action” devoted to the effort to “Stop Kavanaugh” under the slogan “Unleash Your Fury.”

The WSWWS opposes Brett Kavanaugh’s nomination to the US Supreme Court because he is a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary and representative of the financial oligarchy, a conspirator against democratic rights and enemy of the working class.

However, the Democratic Party’s campaign to “Stop Kavanaugh” has nothing progressive or “left-wing” about it. To block this particular reactionary from joining the high court, the Democrats have adopted the tactics associated with the ultra-right: above all, attacks on the presumption of innocence and legal due process. They have eagerly borrowed the methods of the #MeToo sexual witch-hunt, which has already seriously undermined the rights of those accused of crimes or merely charged with “improper” or “inappropriate” behavior.

The Kavanaugh-Blasey Ford issue has become the means by which a great deal of petty bourgeois anger has burst through the dam of respectability. Indeed, the argument is openly being advanced that the supposed unfairness of the hearing *vindicates and demonstrates the need* for such fury.

In her *New York Times* piece, Traister asserts that, in reaction to the Blasey Ford testimony and the Republican counter-attack, “women were incandescent with rage and sorrow and horror.” Which women? Whenever an establishment political commentator refers to “Women” in

general, or “Men” in general, she or he of course means people like her or himself, i.e., other petty bourgeois.

In any case, Traister writes that women “were getting angry in a new way, a public way, an unapologetic way.”

And, in fact, there is a kernel of truth to this. Women like Traister are getting angrier and angrier. Why is that so?

First, it should be pointed out that this appeal to “fury” is associated with a distinct turn toward the irrational in upper-middle class, identity politics circles. In recent years, and especially over the past 12 months, we have been told by their supporters that we need “to believe” the various women (and some men) accusers. That is to say, faith has been elevated over reason, an essentially religious-mythic world outlook over a scientific one, irrationalism over the insistence that objective truth be subject to empirical verification.

Decades and decades of intellectual degeneration lie behind such an approach. Trends such as so-called Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School, in the person of Herbert Marcuse and other figures, placed great emphasis on the problems of alienation and sexual repression at the expense of the centrality of class exploitation within capitalism.

Postmodernism has brazenly promoted irrationalism and philosophical subjectivism, denying the possibility of knowing the world or history objectively. Its rejection of the “grand narrative” of the class struggle and emphasis on “difference” and “micro-politics” helped usher in the era of identity politics, obsessed with race, nationality, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.

An aspect of this irrationalism has been the re-emergence and legitimizing of “myth” in pseudo-left circles, in accordance with Nietzsche’s view: “Without myth, however, every culture loses its healthy creative natural power: it is only a horizon encompassed with myth that rounds off to unify a social movement.”

In other words, it is not important, in many cases, whether an allegation of sexual abuse is factually true if it speaks to supposedly wider realities. One of the best expositions of this view was offered by *Guardian* columnist Jessica Valenti in 2014. In response to the rapid unraveling of the *Rolling Stone* story about “Jackie,” a young woman who claimed to have been the victim of a gang rape at a fraternity house at the University of Virginia, Valenti offered this headline and subheadline: “Who is Jackie? *Rolling Stone*’s rape story is about a person—and I believe her: No matter how the frenzy of denial ends, there is a reason that people believe this young woman: because there are too many people like her.”

Valenti explained, “I choose to believe Jackie. I lose nothing by doing so, even if I’m later proven wrong—but at least I will still be able to sleep at night for having stood by a young woman who may have been through an awful trauma.” And further: “No matter how the media story ends, or what we come to know, there is a reason that people believed and continue to believe Jackie: There are so many people—too many people—who report similar attacks.”

And if, according to the logic of Valenti’s arguments, someone were

sent to prison for years or *merely* had his or her life ruined—much as this is the sense of deprivation, of being hard done by. Traister condescendingly dismisses the “understandable frustrations” of white working class men “in the Rust Belt” (“the loss of jobs and stature, the shortage of affordable health care, the scourge of drugs”) as merely a further example of “the anger of white men.”

This sort of mythological thinking has become deeply embedded in American political life and now manifests itself in the activities and outpourings of both major bourgeois parties, as well as leading publications.

It is both profoundly irrationalist and anti-democratic. The socialist movement stands for rationality and objective analysis as the basis of political activity. It is not for nothing that the principal socialist journal in the US in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was named the *Appeal to Reason*.

In his well-known work, *Fascism and Big Business* (1936), the left-wing writer Daniel Guerin explained, “Socialism is less a religion than a scientific conception. Therefore it appeals more to intelligence and reason than to the senses and the imagination. Socialism does not impose a faith to be accepted without discussion; it presents a rational criticism of the capitalist system and requires of everybody, before his adherence, a personal effort of reason and judgment. It appeals more to the brain than to the eye or the nerves; it seeks to convince the reader or listener calmly, not to seize him, move him, and hypnotize him.”

Nor is the appeal to emotion in the recent books and articles dedicated to “female rage” some sort of summoning of revolutionary anger against the existing system. After all, Karl Marx long ago paid tribute to that “concentrated, conscious class hatred which is the best guarantee for a social upheaval.”

In the same vein, Leon Trotsky, on the eve of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, urged that all efforts “ought to be made to concentrate the bitterness, the anger, the protest, the rage, the hatred of the masses, to give those emotions a common language, a common goal, to unite, to solidify all the particles of the masses, to make them feel and understand that they are not isolated, that simultaneously, with the same slogan on the banner, with the same goal in mind, innumerable particles are rising everywhere. If this understanding is achieved, half of the revolution is done.”

No, what we are dealing with has nothing in common with this. The Democratic Party chose the issue of alleged sexual violence to mobilize its “base” against Kavanaugh, though Democrats had previously declared that it was impossible to block the nomination, for definite political reasons. It never occurred to the Democratic Party that it should seek to mobilize mass working class anger—rage, if you will—on a class and socially progressive basis. That sort of anger holds no attraction to the Democrats and their supporters in the media.

A reviewer of *Good and Mad*, in the *Pacific Standard*, notes correctly, “Traister contends that gender-based rage crosses racial, socioeconomic, geographic, and generational distinctions.” This is gender-exclusive, petty-bourgeois rage, the rage of thwarted or stunted ambitions. This is the outrage of the female journalist, academic, union official, lower-level executive or manager, whose income is in the six-figure range, directed against those who are making “serious money,” the individuals, mostly white and male, who are in the hundred-million and billion-dollar club.

As we have pointed out previously, Traister, Soraya Chemaly, *Time*’s Stephanie Zacharek (who informs us that “if you are a woman, chances are you’re feeling so much rage that there simply aren’t enough hours in the day to contain it all”) and company are not angered nearly so much by American imperialist crimes in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In some cases, they are openly supportive. Traister opposed the invasion of Iraq, but over the course of a decade managed to reconcile herself to Hillary Clinton, who voted for that murderous operation and participated in an administration infamous for drone strikes and “kill lists,” and became a vociferous supporter by the 2016 election.

Neither the plight of tens of millions of refugees nor the conditions of the oppressed in every part of the globe infuriates this crowd a fraction as

In her book, Traister spells it out: “We’ve got to think about these things—history and future—because we are in the midst of a potentially revolutionary moment: not one in which all wrongs will be righted or errors fixed. But one with the potential for a big alteration in who has power in this country.” She is not speaking of the working class taking power, but of an “alteration” in favor of individuals like herself, who feel semi-excluded from the most powerful seats of political and economic influence.

Approvingly, the same *Pacific Standard* reviewer writes, “Indeed, Traister’s predictions could well come to pass in the 2018 mid-term elections. According to the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, an unprecedented 23 women are running for seats in the Senate, 239 women are running for the House of Representatives, 16 women are running for governor, and 26 women are running for lieutenant governor. Another 3,386 women are running for state legislative seats. These are record numbers in all categories.” More female politicians, more female CEOs, more female millionaires and billionaires—this is the wretched perspective of these elements.

Just for the record, and so we are quite clear: The life of a male coal miner in Kentucky, or an unemployed male youth in Ohio, or an opioid-addicted middle-aged man in Pennsylvania, or virtually *any* male or female member of the working class, is a hundred times more burdensome and oppressed than the conditions faced by Traister, Chemaly and all her well-to-do colleagues. There isn’t even a serious comparison.

Again, it is a sign of the extraordinary rightward movement in the intelligentsia that one even feels obliged to make this point, which would have been ABC as recently as the early 1970s. Sympathy for the poor and oppressed as a social class was still widespread among intellectuals and artists until that time. Now the majority reserve that sympathy almost exclusively for themselves.

The appeal to “fury” and outrage, the shift toward irrationalism, the accommodation with imperialist “human rights” interventions, the authoritarian, anti-democratic methods and attitudes and the extreme levels of self-pity and self-centeredness all point to a further sharp turn to the right in political orientation by layers of the privileged petty bourgeoisie. We do not speak lightly of the whiff of fascism in such views.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>