

# Men Explain Things to Me...and I Hardly Care - a review

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Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*. Chicago: Haymarket Press, 2014. 130pp.

The word “mansplaining” refers to the condescending tendency of men to lecture women, despite the man’s lack of knowledge—or even despite the woman’s own expertise—on the subject at hand. It entered into the popular feminist lexicon sometime around 2009, and although Rebecca Solnit didn’t coin it, her essay, “Men Explain Things to Me,” is largely cited as the inspiration.

Since then, “Men Explain Things to Me” has been turned into a short, digestible book of the same title, the titular treatise buttressed by six additional feminist essays. While *Men Explain Things to Me* has been a runaway success, a socialist feminist critique finds that Solnit very much puts the cart before the horse—presuming that male ego or male entitlement is *foundational* to women’s oppression, rather than the *result* of the gendered material, economic, and political reality we shorthand as “the patriarchy.”

Solnit's book includes some cringe-inducing attempts to apply her theory to actual history and politics, including casting France as a “he” and Africa as a “she” in a sweeping metaphor for colonialism (must we gender nations and peoples to understand their sovereignty?). She theorizes that the Bush administration’s disregard of pre-9/11 al-Qaeda warnings could be gendered, noting the FBI agent who issued them was a woman (forgoing the title of “agent,” Solnit curiously refers to her as “the FBI woman”).

Other essays throughout the book meander tangentially, from rape to gay marriage to the wisdom of Virginia Woolf, all under a vague, interpersonal feminist curriculum. To wit, Solnit talks at great length on the importance of women being heard, being seen, being listened to, etc. Socialists tend to operate under the premise that it’s the economically and politically liberated whose voices are most valued, but Solnit takes a consciousness-raising approach, as if women’s social or cultural capital is the key to a more feminist future.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the book is Solnit’s conjecture on the universality of a specific gendered social relation. In her very first essay, she begins a meditation on mansplaining with:

"Every woman knows what I'm talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that crushes young women into silence by indicating,

the way street harassment does, that this is not their world."

There is a certain hypocrisy in this position. Solnit's book is premised on the presumptuousness of men, but she begins this statement with "every woman." While I've never met a woman who hasn't experienced a patronizing and gendered lecture from a man, I've only met a very privileged few who feel the undue confidence of masculinity is their biggest bone to pick with sexism.

And when she gets to those bigger bones, Solnit outright disdains any materialist analysis:

"Instead, we hear that American men commit murder-suicides—at the rate of about twelve a week—because the economy is bad, though they also do it when the economy is good; or that those men in India murdered the bus-rider because the poor resent the rich, while other rapes are explained by how the rich exploit the poor."

There is a wealth (a surfeit, really) of sociological data that shows that sexual predators of all classes, nationalities, ethnic groups, etc., target marginal victims, and very, very often that means poor women (though sometimes it's a college student who would violate an "honor-code" by admitting she drank at a frat party, the predator's wife or girlfriend who hasn't the resources to leave, and the like). It's either thoughtless or disingenuous that Solnit chose to flatten this information into "because the economy is bad." In actively dismissing the legitimate economic factors that put women at risk, she portrays class-based explanations of sexual or gendered violence as akin to sympathy for predators who can't find a job.

The female homicides of Ciudad Juárez—usually referred to as "feminicidios" or "feminicides," due to the significance of the phenomenon—have been studied extensively by academic feminists. In the brilliant 2010 collection of essays, *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, the case is made over and over again for an economic foundation to the mass murders of women. For example, in her article "Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras: Linking Corporate Indifference to Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border," feminist legal theorist Elvia Arriola says,

"...the Juárez murder phenomenon is a story about systematic abuse and violence against working-class employees; that abuse includes exposure to toxicity in the workplace, sexual harassment, and arbitrary disciplinary methods. This systematic abuse is the result of investor privileges guaranteed under NAFTA and repeated in the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which virtually immunize the transnational investor from accountability for harm to the worker, anticipated or not, when conducting business in Mexico."

Given the extensive scholarship connecting the economic welfare and labor rights of women to the violence committed against them, one has to wonder; would Rebecca Solnit accuse Arriola of reducing femicide to 'because the economy is bad'?

It's worth noting that my review of Solnit's book was originally slotted for another publication, but was killed when a male editor sent an email to the rest of the board that started with "My **serious problem** is Frost's review which IMHO **radically misreads Solnit**"—yes, he took time to bold and color the text for effect (oh how I long for the freedom to emote so emphatically without fear of being branded "hysterical"! ). He included a string of select quotes by Solnit, and attached a separate

Solnit article intended to edify my review, though nothing he included was in the book, and my review steered clear of assessing Solnit's career, activist credentials or character.

The man in question ended his email with "IMHO Frost should read the attached Solnit piece and some of her other writings, adjust her attitude, and start again from scratch." I'm not entirely sure if he has a solid grasp of what the "H" in "IMHO" (an acronym for "in my humble opinion") stands for, or why an impersonal, collegial review of a book requires me to "adjust my attitude," but this is the logic of the very real phenomenon of mansplaining. Did I mention that this particular man had not read the book I was reviewing?

And herein lies the kernel of truth to Solnit's work. At this point, the mansplain is such a cliché that stories like this are very nearly redundant in internet-culture-literate circles. The only reason I am recounting this particular incident is to isolate mansplaining from its most predictable context; the irony of his mansplaining feminism to me was apparently lost on him.

Luckily I have another venue for my writing, one where women are not expected to form a united ideological front, and dissent is not conflated with a bad attitude. I happen to believe women's intellectual work is deserving of the same robust debate as work by their male counterparts, and Solnit's widely acclaimed massive hit of a book could stand one little critique.

My own position as a socialist feminist is not that we should be looking to "convert" men, but that we should be looking to liberate women—the first step toward which is seeing the economic factors that leave women vulnerable to abuse and assault.

While I find Solnit all too ready to invoke class as an indicator of her progressivism, she collapses the material and the cultural, deriding, misconstruing or outright ignoring the very real work done that argues women are safest when they are financially secure—a position in which they are more likely to have access to the legal system, as well as community resources and emergency services.

As Solnit attempts to render her argument of ego-oriented consciousness feminism into a political theory that simply holds no water, she acknowledges that only "some men" engage in mansplaining. Yet she seems incapable of considering that *other women* don't relate to it as she does.

I have never once felt "crushed into silence" by something as laughable and ubiquitous as masculine bloviating. In fact, my reactions to sexism (social, economic or otherwise) are quite the *opposite* of silence; this is hardly rare. Some women just walk away from mansplainers in frustration or boredom, a sort of social walkout strike that denies them your audience. There are also some who gladly debate the mansplainers, relishing an easy win. Many of us have no problem pointing out the sexism of mansplaining as it occurs, sometimes only to stand up for ourselves, but sometimes warmly, in the sincere belief that perhaps this particular man could be sympathetic. There are those of us who simply laugh (whether in their faces or behind their backs), some who tell them to shut the hell up and many—like myself—who simply sashay away to more feminist pastures.

*\*Amber A'Lee Frost is a writer and musician in Brooklyn. She is on the National Political Committee of Democratic Socialists of America and a contributor to Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).*