Embracing Anger and Putting It to Work

Expressed honestly, without guilt, anger can birth change, not destruction.

Posted Oct 12, 2018


Almost forty years ago, black feminist Audre Lorde declared “every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being.” Expressed honestly, “without denial or immobility or silence or guilt,” Lorde added, anger could “birth change, not destruction,” by implying “peers meeting on a common basis,” and altering the socially constructed distinctions between men and women.

In *Good and Mad*, Rebecca Traister, a writer-at-large for *New York Magazine*, contributing editor at *Elle*, and author of *All the Single Ladies* and *Big Girls Don’t Cry*, traces the history of female anger from the enslaved Massachusetts woman called Mumbet, the Woman’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, and the suffragettes, to Rosa Parks, Shirley...
Chisholm, and the #metoo movement. In contrast to the anger of men, which is viewed as “stirring, downright American,” she demonstrates, the anger of women has been “suppressed, discouraged, discounted,” and deemed hysterical. All Americans, she maintains, should recognize women’s anger as valid, rational, and a potent progressive political force.

Good and Mad is a polemic. Traister assumes her readers share her feminism and her anger at attacks on reproductive autonomy; violence against African Africans by police officers; the power of the National Rifle Association; gerrymandering and voter suppression; the evisceration of the Affordable Care Act and environmental regulation; the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault; and the small number of women and nonwhite government officials.

Traister does not address the anger of right-wing women against “abortion on demand,” immigration, and the ban on school prayer. Her judgments, at times, seem excessively partisan. Traister characterizes the comment of David Axelrod, Barack Obama’s former advisor, that the “extraordinary and inspiring” women’s march on the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration would “mean little” if the energy was not channeled into sustained political action, as “shrugging condescension.” She gives comedian Michelle Wolf a free pass for suggesting that Sarah Huckabee Sanders “burns facts to get a good eye-makeup effect.” She claims Woody Allen (who, to be sure, has a lot to answer for) called the allegations against Harvey Weinstein a “witch hunt,” even though he said “You also don’t want it to lead to a witch-hunt atmosphere…” And she undercuts the letter in which sixty-four women indicated that Tom Brokaw had treated them with “fairness and respect,” suggesting that they were “defending in part their own ascension within the system that had permitted the men to be abusive.”

That said, Good and Mad makes a compelling case for the efficacy of women’s anger. Determined that no one would tread on them, America’s founders, Traister reminds us, reserved liberty for themselves. To maintain their minority rule, they suppressed the majority (comprised of enslaved and poor people, Indians, and women). Men, she points out, are rarely told that their anger is bad. At the same time, men have exploited norms of “civility” to keep women quiet. Men who worry that expressions of affection will be heard as coercion, generating “unjust consequences,” should know that most women can differentiate between harmless flirtation and harassment. They should be reminded, moreover, that anxiety is “the normal state for just about everyone who is not a white man.” And that just about everyone else has always been told that they had nothing to be angry about or “that’s just the way it is.”
Public expressions of “primal, agonizing anger,” Traister emphasizes, have allowed heretofore silent women to “hear one another for the first time,” and join a community “they’d never known existed,” with a “road map for what to do with their resentments and furies.” #metoo’s “angry surge” constitutes an announcement that “contemporary women are in no mood to play nice.”

Traister knows that telling women “they should simply let it out” risks repeating “a long history of well-intentioned, idealistic, but ultimately impractical approaches to strategy.” In the real world, she writes, “rage might get them fired, denied raises and promotions, incur punishments and violence.”

Traister concludes, however, with an exhortation to women to change “the system built to suppress our ire” by protesting, marching, donating money, running for office, and “making demands of our government and in our workplaces, on behalf of ourselves and, crucially, alongside and on behalf of those with more reason to be furious and less ability to leverage that fury than we have.” That it will take a long time, Traister adds, “shouldn’t scare us. It should fortify us. It must fortify us.”

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