

THE WOMEN'S MARCH

New York, January 21, 2017

Caroline Walker Bynum

Although I'm a knitter and there were plenty of patterns available on the web, I didn't have time to knit a pink pussyhat. But I did make signs—rather staid ones by comparison, as it turned out—before I joined a group of friends at the 116th Street subway stop on our way downtown to the New York City version of the January 21, 2017, Women's March, a sister march to the one in Washington, DC, that drew well over half a million people. Once we finally reached Grand Central Station, it proved impossible to get through to the true starting point at the United Nations Plaza, although we were able to make our way around the barricades and join the throng not too far from the beginning. Moreover, it was not possible for us or for anyone to reach the designated goal, the Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue, sealed off and protected as it was by steel barricades, official vehicles, and New York police. The flood of people was not quite as pink as all the enthusiasm for hats might have predicted (although pictures from the DC march suggest that it was rosier), and to our surprise, there were no television trucks, no helicopters overhead. I kept hearing dismayed complaints of “why aren't they counting us?,” although a few video cameras were looking down from the crowded overpass at Grand Central, and of course everyone was taking pictures of everyone else with the ubiquitous cell phones—not just of people but of the cleverest costumes and signs. And some of the signs *were* clever. Among

Common Knowledge 23:3

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-3987717

© 2017 by Duke University Press

the tamer were “Having a Body Is a Preexisting Condition” and, borne by a very elderly woman, “I don’t usually protest but. . . . Geez!”

Close to our group, several Franciscan friars marched, and a number of folks were dressed as walking vaginas, among other explicit depictions. Along the way, the crush was sometimes almost frightening, so we, like many others, ducked into empty stores to catch our breaths (no one was shopping) or to cut through and out their side doors to try to get a little farther along in the crowd. On Fifth Avenue, the church bells pealed out “This Land Is Your Land” and “Amazing Grace,” and some people sang along. One heard the expected chants: “Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Donald Trump has got to go,” “Refugees are welcome here,” “Black Lives Matter”—nothing original, but no less heartfelt for that. A friend from earlier years, now living in the UK, had warned me, in the time warp that distance creates: “Take a thick scarf and water to wash your eyes in case there is tear gas.” But there was no danger. Police obligingly widened the barriers. Despite a certain seriousness, people were having fun.

Now it is Monday morning, January 23. The media, timid as they have been for the past year, estimate “well over a million people countrywide” but are already gloomily reporting that there was no single theme, that the crowd was too white, that there were disagreements among organizers, and that it will be hard to build or sustain a movement. Indeed, the staggering diversity of issues was one of the most obvious aspects of Saturday’s march. Even among those in my little group, there were many reasons for turning out. Our signs spoke of defending Obamacare, Planned Parenthood, gun control, the inner cities, the environment. If there was no clear agenda, why does it seem so important that my friends and I marched?

Above all, it is important because it was a *women’s* march—a fact that the commentators have not fully noted and understood.

I was young in the Sixties. We marched for civil rights; then we marched to stop a war. Of immense importance and complexity, these were single issues. They were matters literally of life and death—of murders of children in Birmingham and of a leader on a balcony in Memphis, of burnings and killings in Vietnam and Cambodia. Stopping such things was of unimaginable seriousness. But it was easy for those of us who marched to see what was at stake. The chants could be simple: “We shall overcome . . .” “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” Although no one could argue that the roots of such evil were obvious, then or now, or that war and racism are easy to grub out of the American psyche, it was nonetheless clear, when I was young, what the evils were—single (if immensely complex and complexly rooted) evils. Moreover, even recently, the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter campaigns have raised single issues—important and heartbreaking issues—but single. Now, as well as then (when I was young), the leaders against these evils have been men.

I think there is a connection between the fact that Saturday's was a women's march and the fact that there was no one concern, no one demographic, that there was a multiplicity of issues amid chaos, seriousness, and jokes, a bewildering range of protests amid trivia and dressing up, heartbreak and hope. As many of the signs claimed, "women's issues are human issues." Women must protest for their daughters and sons as well as themselves if a president brags about grabbing vaginas; if he threatens to defund major sources of women's health care; if he supports guns in our children's schools; if he would destabilize the Middle East by rejecting the agreement with Iran on nuclear weapons, or the planet by repudiating the Paris accord on climate change; if his economic aims will mean fewer jobs for those already without hope of material advancement or will build fences against desperate people fleeing oppression, starvation, or even execution. For reasons not essentialist but of the moment, women cannot march for only one issue. Their movement must be multifaceted (as indeed the women's movement of the Seventies was multifaceted, but discussing that here would take me too far afield).

The commentators (mostly men) understand this, however. They too are, at the moment, concerned about a multitude of issues, although they have organized no mass march. They warn us against a wide range of specific Trump policies, as the signs in the march did. They, however, look backward, shaking their heads and saying (as did an op-ed piece in today's *New York Times*) that "things will only get worse," while simultaneously asserting that the Democrats are really to blame, that Hillary was really to blame, that those on the two coasts are really to blame . . . that nobody heard, nobody saw. If only, they moan, someone had listened. Even the normally wise and humane Nicholas Kristof asserted quite improbably on December 10, 2016, in the *New York Times* that the fault lies partly with liberal professors who did not urge conservative students to speak up in the classroom.

What these commentators do not seem to understand is how deeply misogyny—a particular sort of misogyny—underlay Hillary Clinton's defeat. What few have admitted is that she lost because she was an expert, an educated, qualified woman, an uppity woman, a "nasty" woman, threatening men's control of the issues. Not because she was a woman, but because she was a qualified, learned, effective woman. The clearest statement of this argument that I have read is Joan Williams's article of November 10, 2016, in the *Harvard Business Review*. Williams understood that the class divide behind Clinton's defeat was a working-class animosity against experts, not against money or privilege but against experts—all sorts of experts, of course, but especially female experts. Many working-class, even middle-class women in the heartland share this fear and animosity with their husbands. "Who does she think she is?" is a pretty common reaction in the churches and sewing circles and book clubs of the American

South and Midwest. The only response left for women who do know what they're talking about—and on a range of issues, from childcare to gun control to immigration to race and sexual identity—seems to be to march.

Here I must be personal again. In the late summer, Trump represented to me what I had experienced so often as a young woman making her way in a man's professional world, sexually harassed, condescended to, and yet on the cusp of opportunity. I believed in the Seventies that things were changing and would continue to change. I knew it would be slow. Ruth Bader Ginsburg has written of experiencing, over and over again, the phenomenon that all expert women of my generation have experienced. You sit in on a discussion, you listen, you make a telling point, no one hears; then ten minutes later a man says exactly what you just said and everyone breathes a sigh of relief: "How brilliant! That solves everything." It is not just men in the electrical supply shop in Des Moines; it is men at the conference of historians at Harvard who cannot hear women's comments, who interrupt women, who erase them with kindness. My own mother, who earned a Harvard PhD in philosophy in the 1930s, was expected by her husband, her parents, and the neighbors in our lower-middle-class neighborhood in Atlanta to stay home and take care of the household. Those same neighbors kept reminding her children: "Your mother is a little peculiar; she doesn't fit in." Yet how hard she tried. Would she have voted for Hillary? I think so, but with what mixed motives? And how much fun my father would have made of Hillary, the "educated woman."

Despite what I thought of as my Ruth Bader Ginsburg experiences, I had confidence until November 8 that my mother's world was fading away. The election brought it all back. Like many of my female friends, I was almost paralyzed by depression. It was hard to know what to do. But now we regroup. We march. We march for all the reasons emblazoned on Saturday's signs. We will phone our senators, write to our newspapers, donate to causes. But, most of all, we will march as experts; we will hold up our heads as expert women. For *all women are experts*, whether in childcare or education, in listening or lawyering, in serving, and, yes, in governing too. Expert, authorized, brave, nasty women. . . . We march on. It's an uphill march.