

A Hard Analysis Of Annihilation

Helena Klassen
St. Mary's College of Maryland

“One of the most important and still unanswered questions in political theory,” Sandra Bartky claims, is how many seemingly “good” people can manage to put up with the wrongs of oppression as it manifests in society today.¹ A politically useful project will be to examine the kind of phenomena that seem to be at work in this mysterious and significant process. If the ultimate goal is to break down oppressive structures and to “enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples,”² then it would be helpful to know what might prevent that from happening and what we can do to remove any obstacles. A useful concept may implicate specific people or groups of people (and potentially incur guilt) so that action may be taken, but it will also provide a way to radically alter how the system of oppression is maintained and understood by individual people. “Oppression is [not only a, but *the*] significant fact around which we should organize our theoretical categories.”³ I will therefore examine a concept I call annihilation, through which oppression constructs and deconstructs many different social identities. Taking a note from Haslanger, I identify “the core phenomenon to be addressed [as] the pattern of social relations that constitute the social classes of men as dominant and women as subordinate.”⁴ Part of using and defining terms for political ends means acknowledging “the force of oppressive systems in framing our personal and political identities.”⁵ When we look at gender, race, or any other category that organizes around a structure of oppression, of systematic domination and subordination, we are looking at both concrete and abstract concepts that actually

1. Sandra Lee Bartky, “In Defense of Guilt,” in *On Feminist Ethics and Politics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 42.

2. Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-1992), 29.

3. Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?,” in *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 164.

4. *Ibid.*, 158.

5. *Ibid.*, 164.

determine our very identities. They "implicate each of us at the heart of our self-understandings," and by making it our project to examine them and change the way they are used, we are called "to reconsider who we think we are."⁶

The term annihilation might colloquially bring to mind epic destruction—a one-time event that obliterates totally. But annihilation is a particular kind of destruction, what Cathy Winkler appropriately calls "social murder."⁷ It is a condition of annihilation that it occurs because we are and because of the way we are linked together in social relations. If oppression has a particular psychological twist to it,⁸ so does annihilation, in the sense that it is something that happens beyond just physical destruction. "The recognition of sexism," or of one's role in sexist systems, "carries considerable personal risk" and is a form of annihilation because it is "accompanied by...forgoing forms of power and privilege the exercise of which determines one's relative social standing."⁹ Annihilation occurs at the level of selfhood; it works to deny fundamentally all that a person understands him- or herself to be. In the socially determined system of gender oppression, annihilation can work both to undermine those it oppresses, as well as to prevent those who fit the role of oppressor from accepting their responsibility for this annihilation, at the risk of their own demise.

Oppression, because of the way it is constructed, puts both dominant and subordinate groups at risk of annihilation. The nature of oppression is that it "attacks the person in her personhood,"¹⁰ which means she may be systematically denied entrance to certain kinds of places, either through fear and coercion or through institutional sexism. She also may be denied certain ways of being and living in the world, such as being able to make autonomous choices. Oppression, especially extreme forms such as systematic violence or marginalization involve "a splitting off of human functions from the human person."¹¹ It is also perpetrated

6. Ibid.

7. Quoted in Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 45.

8. See Sandra L. Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," in *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); and Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* (New York: Norton & Company, 2010).

9. Ann E. Cudd and Leslie E. Jones, "Sexism," in Cudd and Andreasen, *Feminist Theory*, 77.

10. Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," 111.

11. Ibid.

because of the kind of person someone is, based on their social location and their relationship to other social groups. Violence and violations such as abuse and harassment physically and psychologically deny people in oppressed social groups a whole, unified identity that allows them to participate in activities “thought to be essential to a fully human existence.”¹² Susan Brison, a survivor of sexual assault and attempted murder claims “The main reason all of us, especially women, have to fear violent intrusions by others is that they severely impair our ability to be connected to humanity in ways we value.”¹³ In the case of women, violence does not disconnect us from humanity because it violates the script, but because it enforces the part of the script that says we are subordinate, not autonomous, and not able to be fully human persons.

The silencing of oppressed persons is also annihilating. It makes parts of the experience of a person unavailable, linguistically and conceptually,¹⁴ leaving them “unable to determine the nature of what is happening at all.”¹⁵ Victims of violence and oppressed people are also undermined in their ability to speak and in the things they say, because of the kind of people they are.¹⁶ This occurs through systematic misrepresentation. It also happens most often to victims of violence because being a victim, especially of sexual violence, means going through an experience that no one either cares or desires to hear about.¹⁷ We lack the words to talk about violence, and about the annihilation of the self, because we lack the words to talk about the relationship between men and women as anything other than oppressive.

It is fairly clear that someone in an oppressed position is annihilated, or at least is at risk of being annihilated, on a daily basis. What is harder to grasp is the annihilation that is evident in the position of oppressor (or agent of oppression). If one’s identity is built upon a system of oppression that says to be who you are is to be dominant, then you may push back strongly when your position is questioned. As Bartky notes, “most people will struggle, even to the point of

12. Ibid.

13. Brison, *Aftermath*, 61.

14. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

15. Sandra L. Bartky, “Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness,” *Social Theory and Practice* 3 (1975): 433.

16. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

17. Brison, *Aftermath*.

taking up arms, to maintain their privilege."¹⁸ When the advancement of women and racial minorities comes at a "relative loss of status" for white men, when that advancement means there are "more rivals for desirable positions" and when there is a "desire to regain dominance,"¹⁹ there may be violence. Iris Young argues that "the causes of such violence must be traced to unconscious structures of identity formation which project onto some groups the fluid, bodily aspect of the subject that threatens the rigid unity of that identity."²⁰ When an identity is so thoroughly built on the subordination of people who are other, a violent reaction to the change or denial of that other identity may be evidence that the subject is attempting to avoid the annihilation of the self. The violence is then justified to fit the system, working in two ways—to annihilate the other and avoid annihilation of the self. Sexual violence, for example, is justified by patterns of socialization that encourage certain behaviors in men and certain "view[s] of women."²¹ According to Larry May and Robert Strikwerda, these views are "based on common interests, as well as common benefits, extended to all or most men in a particular [patriarchal] culture."²² These patterns are constructed through ideas about masculine identity that include violence and domination as essential parts of what it means to be a "man."

The binary (dominant/subordinate) gendered system of patriarchal society makes it so that one cannot live without the other. To be "woman" means to be dominated *by someone* and to be "man" means to dominate *someone else* (namely, woman). If woman rises above her position of subordination, man's own definition, his own identity, will be annihilated. As the philosopher Montaigne is quoted as saying, "it is easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other."²³ It is easier to deny women a full existence than it is to admit that man's existence would fall apart if woman were anything other than what she is. For those whose

18. Bartky, "In Defense of Guilt," 42.

19. Kate Manne, "In Ferguson and Beyond, Punishing Humanity," *New York Times*, October 12, 2014, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/in-ferguson-and-beyond-punishing-humanity/>.

20. Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in Cudd and Andreasen, *Feminist Theory*, 102.

21. Larry May and Robert Strikwerda, "Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape," *Hypatia* 9 (1994): 142.

22. *Ibid.*, 145.

23. Simone de Beauvoir, "Introduction from *The Second Sex*," in Cudd and Andreasen, *Feminist Theory*, 32.

identities are built on top of the system, challenging the system will cause everything they know to be true to crumble, to be annihilated. They have done it to others and so know what it is. But because what they have done to others is so insidious, they can hardly comprehend what their own annihilation looks like. Instead they only feel a subtle dread in response to what is happening in the world today. They see women and people of color rising against the system, and they know their own annihilation is not far behind.

Just as the dominant are annihilated when that identity and position is questioned, so too are the subordinate annihilated in the very act of pushing back against the system. This makes it incredibly difficult for all parties to attempt to end oppressive systems. As Friedman puts it, “our reflective capacities and our very identities are always partly constituted by communal traditions and norms that we cannot put entirely into question without at the same time voiding our very capacities to reflect.”²⁴ The realization of the contradictory and ultimately oppressive nature of society is a radical alteration of the way one lives in the world.²⁵ Fighting at all can be a way to deny the very identities you wish to challenge, but contradicting the identity that forms your very existence also comes at a risk. Because women’s identities are also built on a system of domination and subordination, women may actually be unwilling to push back against what and who they fundamentally are determined to be. It has made them not only actually dependent on men, but truly believe in their dependence. As Simone de Beauvoir points out, in the position of subordinate, women “avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence.”²⁶ “Woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity, and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*.”²⁷ The fear of annihilation is what keeps her in check, just as the fear of annihilation helps men to ignore oppression and maintain their position of domination.

Annihilation is both difficult to comprehend as well as difficult to avoid. It exists in the very nature of the relationship between men and women, between white and black, between those who are dominant and those who are subordinate.

24. Marilyn Friedman, “Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women,” in Cudd and Andreasen, *Feminist Theory*, 343.

25. Ibid.

26. de Beauvoir, “Introduction from *The Second Sex*,” 31.

27. Ibid.

The system has been rigged from the start. The only way to destroy the system is to *annihilate* the concept of "man" and "woman" as we know them now. Marilyn Friedman argues that autonomy, as a tool that patriarchy has used to promote men's interests, can be used to dismantle this system when used by women to examine and make their own values and choices ("the master's tools" *can* be used to "dismantle the master's house"²⁸). Autonomy is "instrumentally valuable as a means for resisting oppression and intrinsically valuable as part of the fullest humanly possible development of moral personality."²⁹ Autonomy also has the potential to disrupt social relationships. It turns out that we might have to disrupt some, or even many, social relationships in order to free ourselves from the bonds of oppression. However, this disruption, Friedman says, is "crucial for women in patriarchal conditions, in part because of its potential to disrupt social bonds" that may be harmful to them.³⁰ But if this is the way annihilation is, "don't we at least need a concept...that will be useful in the reconstructive effort, not only the destructive one?"³¹

It is the nature of being human that we exist in social relationship to other beings. In this relationship, we can be either sustained or annihilated by others. "The self is both autonomous and socially dependent, vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of empathic others."³² Being in relation to another is at once an opportunity for domination/subordination as well as an opportunity to construct new definitions of that relationship and the individuals within it. The philosophy of Deconstruction tells us that disassociation (objects being delineated as they are by being not-something-else) *is* unity. Becoming autonomous is becoming able to form unities of identity based on personal choice and agency. A relationship with someone or something "other" is only possible because that thing *is other*. If we take it to be true that you only exist because someone is other to you, then if woman (as Haslanger defines it³³) no longer exists because that concept has been deemed oppressive and no longer viable, then man as she defines it also cannot exist. That is annihilation. One might wish to avoid annihilation because of a fear

28. Friedman, "Autonomy," 347.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 166.

32. Brison, *Aftermath*, 38.

33. Haslanger, "Gender and Race," 159.

that it has extremely negative outcomes. Although some of the outcomes of annihilation may be considered negative to those in power—for example, losing their priority access to certain social benefits—the other side of the fire offers much more to gain than it does to lose. To be annihilated is to realize and live out a social order in which relationships, as we know them now, are deconstructed to the point of non-resemblance. They will no longer exist because they will be defined under totally different conditions.

The human condition will always be one of oppression only if we accept that men and women will be implicated in a structure of domination and subordination forever and always. When we come to understand the harm of oppression within the current landscape, we often feel guilty. We feel guilty because we know that we are constructed under and into oppression—but it does not have to be that way. In fact, feelings such as guilt alert us to the fact that something is inherently wrong with the way social relations are constructed.³⁴ One way to look at these feelings is as part of a “feminist consciousness,” which Bartky understands “as the negating and transcending awareness of one’s own relationship to a society heavy with the weight of its own contradictions.”³⁵

If we refuse altogether to be defined according to systems of domination and subordination we may still be able to maintain the unity of relationship to others while doing away with oppression. For instance, victims of sexual violence may read Brison’s compelling book and come to recognize their own situation in a meaningful way because it now stands in relationship to Brison’s experience. As Brison purports, “one remakes oneself by finding meaning in a life of caring for and being sustained by others.”³⁶ Judith Butler maintains “the self must...be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself.”³⁷ It is social relationships that construct and compel our autonomous identities. If we can work out new conceptions of the self in relation to others, we may be able to create new narratives that stop violence and oppression before they even begin. One’s relationships with others are essential in constructing the person one wants to be, and the person one wants to be, the autonomous self who lives and makes choices “according to standards or values that are, in some plausible sense, one’s

34. Bartky, “Feminist Consciousness.”

35. *Ibid.*, 437.

36. Brison, *Aftermath*, 66.

37. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7.

own,"³⁸ is still at least partially socially constructed. One develops the methods by which to live, as well as the ability to choose, by participating in a social world where one learns through others and comes to understand one's experience through the communicative validation of those around them. What will be required is a "systematic rethinking,"³⁹ as Friedman calls it, of our relationships with others. Linda Alcoff writes "We are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tension in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also. When I speak for myself, I am constructing a possible self, a way to be in the world, and am offering that to others, whether I intend to or not, as one possible way to be."⁴⁰ Those possibilities "[depend] on discovering, or perhaps imaginatively inventing, a different identity."⁴¹ We all must start reimagining and reconstructing our relationships with others in order to annihilate the concept of "man" and "woman" as we currently know them, without annihilating the individuals themselves.

Bibliography

- Alcoff, Linda. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 5-32.
- Bartky, Sandra L. "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness." *Social Theory and Practice* 3 (1975): 425-439.
- "In Defense of Guilt." *On Feminist Ethics and Politics*, edited by Claudia Card. 29-51. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999.
- "On Psychological Oppression." In *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. 105-113. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.
- Brison, Susan. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Cudd, Ann E. and Leslie E. Jones. "Sexism." In *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. 73-83. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.

38.Friedman, "Autonomy," 340.

39.Ibid., 341.

40.Alcoff, "Speaking for Others," 21.

41.Cudd and Jones, "Sexism," 81.

- de Beauvoir, Simone. "Introduction from *The Second Sex*." In *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. 27-36. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.
- Fine, Cordelia. *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*. New York: Norton & Company, 2010.
- Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Friedman, Marilyn. "Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women." In *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. 339-351. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.
- Haslanger, Sally. "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" In *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. 154-170. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.
- Manne, Kate. "In Ferguson and Beyond, Punishing Humanity." *New York Times*, October 12, 2014. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/in-ferguson-and-beyond-punishing-humanity/>.
- May, Larry and Robert Strikwerda. "Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape." *Hypatia* 9 (1994): 134-151.
- Young, Iris M. "Five Faces of Oppression." In *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. 91-104. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.