One of the great misconceptions about the New Feminism is that it represents a war on men. You hear this argument from both sides of the discussion, from the critics of the New Feminism and from its champions, too. The critics say, ‘This feminism is a really unfair attack on blokes and it should be called off,’ and the proponents say, ‘We’ve finally taken the war to the patriarchy, we’re bringing men down a peg or two, and it’s about time we did.’ So both agree, in different ways, that this is a new movement which has declared war on men, or at least on male privilege.

The people who make this argument most often are men’s rights activists, who are the saddest people in the world. They live on the Internet. They spend most of their time in discussion forums crying their eyes out. And they blame feminism for every problem in their lives. The reason they can’t get a girlfriend is because feminism has made all women into lesbians or bitches. The reason they can’t get a job is because feminism has taken over the workplace and men are no longer welcome. It’s from these people that you most often hear the argument that the New Feminism is a war on men, a war on boys, a war on blokeish everyday life.

I think it’s wrong to see the New Feminism in this way, because if anything the New Feminism is a war on women. It explicitly calls into question the ability of women to negotiate public life without the assistance of others. It calls into question, not so much male privilege, as female autonomy, female capacity. It might mock men, but it does down women, and it does them down in a very profound way.

I was thinking recently that one of the great ironies of my life, as someone who works in the media, is that pretty much the only time I hear open contempt for women these days is when I’m in discussions with feminists. I come from a family of unreconstructed men. Pretty much every man in my family works in the building trade. They read tabloid newspapers, they watch football, they drink booze. And I don’t hear contempt from any of them, from what is today presented to us, falsely in my view, as the most sexist section of society: working-class men. Rather, I only hear contempt for women when I’m debating middle-class, media-based feminists, the very people who pose as the champions of women.

Just think about the phrases they use. One of their favourites is ‘internalised misogyny.’ This is the idea that women have been so brainwashed by patriarchal culture that they don’t know what’s good for them anymore. The reason they pick certain courses at university and the reason they go into certain apparently female-appropriate careers is because they’ve been ‘conditioned’ to think that is the right road in life for them. ‘Conditioning,’ according to my dictionary, is the process by which ‘the behaviour of an organism becomes dependent on an event occurring in its environment.’ That’s how many New Feminists view women: as things conditioned by the corrupt, patriarchal environment that surrounds them. New Feminists also claim that huge numbers of women have ‘body-loathing issues,’ meaning they have been educated by the media—that is, brainwashed—to hate themselves.

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They thoughtlessly internalise society's alleged loathing of them.

This idea that women are malleable, fickle creatures is a rehabilitation of the old, foul notion that women don't know their own minds—though now it gets dressed up in the pseudo-academic language of ‘internalised misogyny.’

Another argument that the New Feminists often make is that women have very fragile self-esteem. This is the reason they want to censor pornography, get rid of Page 3 girls in The Sun, restrict the availability of certain violent videogames, and keep sexist hip-hop stars away from their nations—because they believe these images and words ‘damage women and girls’ self-esteem.’ They always say ‘women and girls.’ It’s a real sleight of hand, because in their mind there is no difference between women and girls. This speaks to their very infantilising belief that these two categories of people, adults and children, can casually be spoken of in the same breath, as if an adult woman’s response to a shocking image is no different to what a girl’s response would be: both would be equally damaged, apparently.

This idea that women need to be protected from images is based on the notion that they are weak, fragile, less capable of seeing upsetting things than men are.

Another favourite New Feminist idea is that street harassment is rampant. Apparently, over the past few years, the streets have become incredibly dangerous for women: there’s catcalling, wolf-whistling, people who might start a conversation with you. And women can’t cope with that, apparently. We are told that society needs new rules, new regulations, or at the very least a system of re-education for men and boys—to correct their habit of engaging with members of the opposite sex—in order to help women negotiate their way through the terrifying public sphere.

This New Feminist view of women as pathetic reaches its terrifying logical conclusion on campus, where female student leaders create ‘safe spaces’ and women-only spaces in which nothing outrageous may be said. They call for trigger warnings on books, particularly books that mention sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape. Even works of classic literature that mention rape are now having trigger warnings attached, in case a fragile female student should read them and feel upset. It’s worth recalling the 1960 London trial on whether D.H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover should be made freely available. One of the lawyers who wanted to restrict access to the book asked the now infamous question, ‘Would you wish your wife or servant to read this book?’ The implication was that of course us men can read it, but women? That statement is often held up as evidence of how out of touch was the old British establishment at the dawn of the 1960s. Yet now a very similar argument is made by supposedly radical New Feminists: ‘We can’t possibly let women see that image or read that book, at least not without thoroughly warning them beforehand.’

New Feminists argue that public life is too harsh, too scary, too brainwashing, and therefore women need special help.

You see the same patronising New Feminist arguments in virtually all spheres of public life. In the workplace, in education, in government circles: it’s always said that we need to change the culture in various institutions in order to make them more welcoming to women. We need to make them less male—and what that often means is that we need to make them less demanding, less confrontational, more consensual. We particularly hear this argument in relation to politics. Politics must become ‘less blokey’ and more soft, because otherwise the wilting wallflowers that New Feminists believe make up womankind won’t feel welcome and won’t cope.

For years feminists argued that women should be liberated from the home because they were more than capable of dealing with the rough and tumble of public life. Now New Feminists argue that public life is too harsh, too scary, too brainwashing, and therefore women need special help. The arguments once made by misogynists are now made by feminists.

It’s also instructive to look at New Feminist books, which have become the latest cash cow of the publishing world. They have titles like ‘How to Be a Woman,’ ‘Do It Like a Woman,’ ‘A Book
NEW FEMINISM’S WAR ON WOMEN

for Her.’ They’re a weird mix of self-help and sassy broad: Germaine Greer meets Oprah Winfrey meets Frank McCourt; part misery memoir, part feministic tract. These books devote much of their content to slagging off women. Women who shave too much, preen too much, who’ve had plastic surgery, who’ve obviously been brainwashed by porno culture or pop culture. In other words, they don’t know their own minds, and thus they need the help of the more spiritual New Feminists, who are heroically immune to their cultural surroundings and are therefore pure, insightful, ready to re-educate the rest of us, women and men alike.

So the New Feminism represents, not a war on men, but a massive insult to women. It’s a really dangerous reversal of the enormous gains that have been made for womankind over the past hundred years. Women have won the right to vote, the right to work, they were increasingly being seen as autonomous, just as capable and free-willed as men. Now that’s all being undone by the New Feminism, which has pushed a view of women as fragile, always unsafe, lacking free will, incapable of making autonomous choices due to the suffocating culture.

The Victorian view of women is making a comeback. In the Victorian era, women were often protected from certain printed material which society, or their chaperones, considered unfit for them—now New Feminists seek to protect ‘women and girls’ from Page 3 or gangsta rap. In the Victorian era there were numerous campaigns designed to protect women from street harassment. The Lady Magazine, in the late 1800s, ran a campaign called ‘Protection of Women,’ which depicted the rough, ugly public sphere as unsuitable for women. That idea is coming back too. And one of the key arguments made in the nineteenth century against allowing women to attend university was that their dainty minds would be assaulted by too much controversial matter and by dodgy male behaviour. Today, it’s New Feminists who claim university is unsafe for women, everywhere from the library, with its shocking books, to the university square, with its lads or frats.

But I think even this is not the full story. Even calling the New Feminism a war on women doesn’t tell us everything. Because while the New Feminism most openly undermines women’s standing in society, it also represents an attack on humanist, liberal values, on modern Enlightened ideals. The New Feminism is at the cutting edge of undermining the key ideals of free, democratic societies.

In the sphere of Knowledge, for example, New Feminist ideas have played a key role in questioning whether the truth is really discoverable and depicting rationalism and reason as cold, ‘male’ values. The ideal of democracy is being undermined by the so-called feminisation of politics, the notion that we must drain politics of its edge, its argumentativeness—the lifeblood of democracy—and instead make it more consensual. The idea of justice is threatened by New Feminist ideas: the limiting of tough cross-examination in the name of protecting rape claimants in particular, and the use of kangaroo courts on Western campuses to punish alleged sexual offenders, speaks to the diminution of the idea of justice as something rigorous, fair, and open.

The values of the modern Enlightened age are being undermined by the New Feminism. But this is not down to some evil cabal of high-heeled feminists who have set out to destroy modern society. Rather, Western society itself has lost faith in those values, over the past few decades, and it is constantly looking about for a new idea or campaign through which it might make its abandonment of those values look like something progressive rather than regressive. New Feminism is its latest campaign, the new means though which a disoriented, post-Enlightened West now jettisons its values of liberty, democracy, justice, knowledge, and autonomy, under the cynical guise of ‘helping women.’ And girls.