

BOOK REVIEW:

*HOUNDED: WOMEN, HARMS AND THE GENDER WARS*¹

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Lindsay, Jenny. *Hounded: Women, Harms and the Gender Wars*. Polity Press, 2024.

In *Hounded*, Scottish poet and critic Jenny Lindsay offers a meticulous, lucid, and often harrowing examination of what she calls “the hounding”: a repeatable – to the point of being almost ritualised – pattern of public shaming, professional punishment and personal isolation experienced by women who challenge gender identity ideology. Far from a memoir of grievance, *Hounded* presents itself as a sociological and cultural study of a phenomenon that has swept through sectors as wide-ranging as publishing, academia, health care, and the arts. Lindsay (1) argues that what is happening to women who hold what she terms the “Core Beliefs” is neither isolated nor anomalous, but systemic at its core. “What Hannah says feels poignantly, if sorrowfully, relatable”, she writes, quoting her friend:

Watching people I had respected organize to defend such obvious lies. Watching them jostle to punish women, all in the name of social belonging. They will memory-hole it, though . . . pretend that they never treated us this way, or that we deserved it. That what we said was worse than it was. But the harmful effect of what has been done won’t go away. (Lindsay 153)

In fact, the book goes on to ensure that these harms are not forgotten. This is almost, as Lindsay herself hints, the anatomy of a modern witch-hunt.

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Even in its opening pages, *Hounded* establishes itself as a work written from inside the blast radius. After criticising justifications for violence against women labelled TERFs, Lindsay describes how she went from being a well-respected poet to someone who felt forced out of Edinburgh, a city whose culture she had, as an author and organiser, helped to sustain for decades. However, Lindsay's Prologue seems to avoid lingering on autobiographical material and instead frames her experience as one example of a wider pattern. Lindsay presents what she describes as psychological, professional, and social harms faced by women who question prevailing gender identity claims, noting that these harms are not limited to public figures. She observes that "every woman faces treatment that is strikingly similar, though, depending on circumstances, it can differ in terms of visibility, survivability and scale" (Lindsay ix). Her refusal to foreground her own story lends her argument greater authority, as the reader senses that her insights arise from both analysis and first-hand experience.

A central feature of the book is its articulation of the three "Core Beliefs" (1) held by many feminist and gender-critical women. Although Lindsay does not reproduce them in detail, she notes that, until recently, they were considered "wholly uncontroversial" (16), but are now regarded as unacceptable in certain professional and social environments. The book occasionally assumes a shared understanding of these Core Beliefs rather than fully unpacking them, which may leave some readers wanting a clearer conceptual foundation. She argues that the current ideology "requires layers of scaffolding to prop [its claims] up" (Lindsay 16), and that women who raise even modest questions are treated not as legitimate conversational partners but as heretics. The early chapters describe the emergence of a cultural climate in which "it has been made nearly impossible for women who do not share gender identity beliefs to assert their position without causing offence" (xiv). For those who become hounded, none of the three Core Beliefs is controversial in the least. By presenting these women as casualties of a rapid ideological realignment rather than provocateurs, Lindsay seeks to repurpose context to a discourse that is often distorted by caricature. Although *Hounded* may be interpreted by some as a culture-war intervention, the renowned poet writes from a materialist feminist standpoint, grounding her analysis in the political relevance of sex, and in women's own accounts of harm. She frames the "hounding" (viii) not as a series of personal disputes but as a structural pattern that disproportionately targets women for expressing lawful views about their sex-based rights. In defending women's freedom to speak, assemble,

and organise, the book aligns with a longstanding feminist tradition which has been concerned with material conditions, institutional power and the costs of female nonconformity.

One of the book's most interesting contributions is its examination of psychological harms. While this analysis is compelling within Lindsay's chosen framework, it rests largely on testimonial evidence rather than broader empirical data. That said, her methodological choice lends emotional immediacy but also leaves some of her broader generalisations open to challenge. Lindsay details the cognitive and emotional consequences of living in tension with what she regards as an incoherent yet dominant belief system. She observes that many women pass through a period of "feeling as if you may be going mad" when they first encounter new orthodoxies surrounding gender identity (Lindsay 16). The disorientation intensifies once women speak publicly. Kathleen Stock recalls: "rumours, lies, distortions proliferate . . . 'What do I have to defend now?'" (Lindsay 30). Lindsay (30) argues that the aftermath frequently involves panic, isolation, the loss of colleagues, communities and livelihoods, and a profound sense of "being cast out from a formerly solid network." These patterns, she suggests, function not merely as punishment but, in fact, as coercion: they create consensus by making disagreement emotionally unbearable. At one point she summarises the dynamic with devastating brevity: "It is no exaggeration to describe this as psychologically and emotionally abusive behaviour, keenly recognised as such by women with past experience of such abuse in the private sphere" (36).

The book's case studies serve to reinforce its argument; Lindsay shows that the pattern replicates itself with unsettling consistency, whether the woman is a birth-rights advocate, a children's author, a philosopher, a United Nations official or a choreographer. The case of Milli Hill in the birthing world demonstrates how swiftly a woman can be ostracised for raising concerns about language in women's health care. "By sidelining Hill, a veneer of agreement about 'birthing people' has instead been allowed to dominate" (29), she writes. In the arts, the destruction of Rosie Kay's dance company following complaints about her stating that sex is binary reveals the fragility of artistic freedom in the face of ideological scrutiny. Kay describes the stakes plainly: "To deny [that sex is binary] is to deny the basis of my art. That is proper cancellation" (26), where even neutral gestures were retrospectively reframed as abuses of power. Publishing provides one of the book's most distressing examples. Children's author Rachel Rooney, whose picture

book *My Body Is Me!* celebrates bodily self-acceptance, found herself subjected to an extraordinary campaign of denunciation. Rooney, Lindsay (100) observes, “could not have anticipated the book industry response” and endured trolling even when highly popular celebrities read her books for charity events. In this way, her eventual decision to leave publishing altogether stands as one of the clearest illustrations of the cultural cost of nonconformity.

Towards its final sections, *Hounded* examines the democratic harms that arise when institutions enforce ideological orthodoxy. The passage of the Gender Recognition Reform Bill in the Scottish Parliament becomes a central example, culminating in Elaine Miller’s now widely reported intervention: “If this parliament will not respect the rights of women [...] then I will be indecent!” (Lindsay 114). Lindsay is less concerned with the theatricality of the moment than with what it reveals about democratic breakdown. In her account, political processes had become so constrained that dramatic protest seemed the only meaningful way to register such opposition. Equally troubling, Lindsay observes, are the institutional responses to United Nations Special Rapporteur Reem Alsalem, who was denounced in an open letter for warning of foreseeable harms arising from self-identification laws. The letter expressed alarm that Alsalem described women’s rights as grounded in biological sex, asserting instead that sex is “socially constructed, rather than fixed, essentialist, binary, biological” (57). In *Hounded*, Lindsay presents such statements as examples of a wider institutional discomfort with material reality and of a tendency to equate disagreement with moral wrongdoing.

What ultimately gives *Hounded* its force is Lindsay’s insistence that the issue is not whether the women she describes are correct in their views. She argues that in a liberal democracy, the consequences they face for expressing what she sees as licit opinions are disproportionate and unacceptable regardless of the underlying dispute. “It has been judged lawful to hold the first two Core Beliefs . . . it follows that any gathering of those with such beliefs is lawful” (145), she notes. This appeal to democratic principle, rather than ideological victory, shapes the book’s moral anchor and its most persuasive claim on the reader’s attention. Readers may reject the Core Beliefs Lindsay defends or take issue with her political conclusions; still, *Hounded* compels engagement with its central assertion: that women across numerous fields are being systematically punished for “thinking that there are male and female humans and that this might be politically or practically important” (36). Written with elegance, clarity, and resolve, Jenny Lindsay’s

book stands as one of the most incisive documents of the current gender-identity era. It is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand not only the conflicts of the present moment but the deeper cultural dynamics of conformity, speech, and the escalating price of dissent – whether or not one ultimately agrees with Lindsay's conclusions.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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