

# Resistance is an Intimate Art

## Stories from the Middle of a Sexual Revolution

Marieke Bivar

2022

a review of

*Sexual Revolution: Modern Fascism and the Feminist Fightback* Laurie Penny. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022

“This [book] is an exercise in pointing out the obvious. There is a slow-moving sea change happening in gendered power relations. It’s been building for decades now. And it has to do with economics; it has to do with imbalances and rebalances in structural violence and how power is organized and operates. And the reaction to that sexual revolution explains a great deal of modern politics.”

—Laurie Penny, “Laurie Penny on The Sexual Revolution,” (*Current Affairs*, April 2022)

The thread that carries through Laurie Penny’s new book, *Sexual Revolution*, is, as the title would imply, the current, past, and ongoing revolution in sexual and gender identity, expression, orientation and power dynamics, all in the face of a worldwide fascist resurgence.

Penny writes not only about the need for this revolution, but also about the ways in which women, trans, and queer people are already fighting for it, sometimes with their very existence. The need for revolution, disruption, an explosion of sex and gender roles weaves explicitly in and out of chapters organized and ordered thematically.

Penny started out as a blogger whose posts were thematically linked, which is also the feel of the book. The chapters could easily stand alone as blog posts, essays, or articles, but they also refer to each other and invite each other into being. Penny has an uncanny knack for finding perfect moments of transition and connection between different aspects of any given subject. Their reflections on beauty standards, for example, lead to a discussion of disordered eating, then drawing parallels between eating disorders, self-denial, and our relationships to desire in a more general sense.

This talent for transition also applies to the work as a whole. In a chapter entitled “Labours of Love,” Penny explores the forms of violence inherent in heterosexual relationships. Drawing on the work of bell hooks and other feminist writers, they observe that, “love is still so often the language in which we learn to understand violence.”

Examining the ways in which heterosexual love specifically is centered and prioritized as part of the experience of being a woman, as well as the ways that patriarchy enforces itself through heterosexuality allows Penny to create a natural bridge into the subsequent chapter’s discussion of women’s bodies at work.

The intense and gendered violence experienced by women in the workplace is simply an extension of the first gendered workplace, which is the home. This organically becomes Penny’s area of focus in their discussion of “The Home Front,” in which they look at the ways in which the home is often the first-place women encounter an unequal and gendered distribution of labor.

Penny writes that:

“there are any number of situations where male dominance operates on a structural level—where individual men are not really to blame for women’s lack of power over their lives. This is not one of those situations. When it comes to the home front, men’s learned laziness is the problem. It is men and boys, refusing to give up the privilege

of having someone else take care of their domestic needs, who are standing in the way of progress...The home, for a great many women, and particularly for a great many mothers, is a hostile work environment.”

This discussion of gendered labor continues to sharpen its focus to hone in on reproduction and reproductive rights. In Penny’s discussion of these subjects, and in most of the subjects they explore, they are careful to address the intersectional oppression facing Black, brown and migrant women. In contextualizing the relative newness of the state’s obsession with regulating reproductive rights, they also point out how the U.S. history of enslaving Black people has always made the state and authorities hypervigilant in restricting the reproductive rights of Black women.

“Unsurprisingly,” they write, “There have always been different standards in play for control of white women’s reproductive choices and those of Black, brown and migrant women.” The owning of Black bodies was further motivation for slave owners to restrict any form of birth control and abortion for Black enslaved women, and Indigenous women have been sterilized without their knowledge or consent to further reinforce the colonial project in the Americas. Yet up until the 1870s, white women in some parts of the United States were relatively free to access a variety of forms of birth control (barring interference from certain religious authorities). Adding this layer of understanding to this very timely issue is another reminder to acknowledge the ways in which White supremacy has worked hand in hand with patriarchy.

Part of the strength of Penny’s writing is its subjectivity, which is often expressed through storytelling and personal anecdotes. There are no chapters or paragraphs of dry facts masquerading as objective. Penny’s perspective is staunchly partisan.

In their 2015 BuzzFeed article, “How to be a Gender-queer Feminist,” they spoke about where they stand as a nonbinary person when it comes to feminism, writing that, although this is by no means a stance they expect all non-binary people to adopt, because of the way they have experienced the world because of their gender assignment and presentation, they identify as a woman politically, and will continue to do so “as long as women’s reproductive freedom is under assault.” It is evident that this is a writer who is constantly seeking to understand, expand, and invite women, genderqueer people, and other readers to participate in an ongoing and escalating sexual revolution.

After their extensive discussion of the ways that modern fascism is escalating the need for sexual revolution, in “End-note,” Penny leaves readers with a final summary of the way these dynamics have been playing out in the public sphere of political life over the past decade.

“At a time of global crisis,” they write, “our lives are in the sweaty hands of men who have built a mass movement around refusing to handle their emotions like adults.” The irony of the political Right being incapable of separating emotions from facts is not lost on Penny. This is the same misogynistic phenomenon that leads a patriarchal society terrorized by the constantly out of control emotions of angry men to label women as emotional when they speak out about the violence and oppression they face at the hands of men.

Making connections between our intimate relationships and our relationships with systems of power can allow us to identify the parallels between the abusive treatment women endure in abusive relationships and under the abusive systems of White supremacy and patriarchy. It also can enable us to use the tools and knowledge the feminist and anti-racist movements have gathered and built-in order to survive this world for our sexual revolution.

Penny reminds us that the key to a successful revolution will be “establishing basic safety, centering the experiences of the vulnerable and of survivors, [and] refusing to let those who abuse their power to reshape reality or rewrite our collective history.” In the age of Trump, Bolsonaro, the alt-right and other fascist and proto-fascist leaders and movements, Penny’s analysis is timely and important.

As feminists have been reminding us for over a century now, the personal will not only always be political, but the political is a reflection of what our society tolerates and encourages in our homes and intimate lives.

Marieke Bivar is in Tiohtià: ke / Montreal. She is a Tia to an assortment of humans and other creatures, a writer, a translator, and a creator of endless side-hustles. She hopes to spend the end of this world by the ocean with her loved ones, dreaming a new one into being.

# fifth Estate

Marieke Bivar  
Resistance is an Intimate Art  
Stories from the Middle of a Sexual Revolution  
2022

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/412-fall-2022/resistance-is-an-intimate-art>  
Fifth Estate #412, Fall, 2022

**[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**