

David McQueen Remarks on Sexual Harassment on LinkedIn: January 2018

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“BLURRED LINES?”

A continuing discussion I see cropping up on my timeline is this clarity between what is considered flirting and what is sexual harassment especially off the back of the #MeToo campaign.

For the record, I see it as quite straightforward. The difference is a matter of consent. The fear/excitement associated with frisson is very different from that of a person wanting to find the nearest exit because they are afraid. But I do understand for some, how it may be a blurred line.

The recent pushback by a number of high profile women who see the campaign as only highlighting fragility in a woman and emasculating men who have a right to hit on women has raised an eyebrow or two and further complicates what is an important debate about boundaries at work (and beyond).

I found this piece by Lauren Collins of the New Yorker to be an important piece in helping to unblur the lines.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/why-did-catherine-deneuve-and-other-prominent-frenchwomen-denounce-metoo>

Why Did Catherine Deneuve and Other Prominent French Women



Denounce #MeToo?

Photograph by Edward Berthelot / Getty

Lauren Collins: January 10, 2018 5:30 PM

Despite the impulse to view the statement by the actress Catherine Deneuve and others as some innately French point of view, this isn't a straightforward case of cultural difference.

One morning last summer, I was out doing errands near my apartment, in Paris. I had a phone call to make, so I stopped and leaned against a wall. Before I knew what was happening, a man was running his hands over my breasts and my belly, which felt like an especially private part, since I was eight months pregnant. I couldn't move or speak, out of fear that he had somehow damaged my baby. The man was halfway down the block before I gathered myself and screamed after him the crudest curses I could muster. I went to a police station and reported what had happened, hoping only to create a paper trail for whomever he attacked next. It was a vile and insignificant experience. I hadn't thought about it again until I saw, yesterday, that a hundred French women, including the actress Catherine Deneuve and the writer Catherine Millet, had signed [an opinion piece in *Le Monde*](#), defending "a freedom to bother, indispensable to sexual freedom." "A freedom to bother"—it was the first time I'd heard that one. (The word that the women used, "*importuner*," ranges in connotation from bugging someone to really disturbing her. Whatever the level of offence, the behaviour is clearly unwanted.) Was this some bold new European liberty, like the [right to be forgotten](#)? One didn't have to read far to figure out that the statement was just another apologia for sexual assault and harassment. "Rape is a crime," the piece in *Le Monde* began. "But hitting on someone insistently or awkwardly is not an offence, nor is gallantry a chauvinist aggression." When the second sentence of an argument makes a turn against the wrongness of rape, you know you are not in for a subtle debate. Deneuve and her co-signers run through a series of tired arguments, conflating the censure of sexual violence with censorship, and misconstruing #MeToo feminism as "a hatred of men and of sexuality." The movement, they write, renders women "eternal victims, poor little things under the influence of demon phalocrats, as in the good old days of witchcraft." (Daphne Merkin chose a different period setting for an [Op-Ed in the *Times*](#), writing, "We seem to be returning to a victimology paradigm for young women, in particular, in which they are perceived to be—and perceived themselves to be—as frail as Victorian housewives.") The *Le Monde* hundred find the concept of informed consent ridiculous. They defend Roman Polanski, sound a few notes on the dog whistle of "religious extremists," and talk about the touching of knees while remaining silent on men demanding blowjobs and masturbating behind locked doors. It's the small jabs that betray a hostility to the entire #MeToo project, not just its excesses. "A woman can, in the same day, lead a professional team and enjoy being the sexual object of a man, without being a 'slut,' nor a cheap accomplice of the patriarchy," they write. "She can insure that her salary is equal to a man's, but not feel forever traumatized by a *frotteur* in the Métro." Ladies, one of these clauses is not like the others! Consensual sex is no more akin to being rubbed up against in the subway than drinking

wine is to being roofied. A woman can fight for equal pay and not like assault, or tuna-fish sandwiches. There's no connection.

Where does this sort of obliviousness come from? Despite the impulse, online and elsewhere, to attribute it to some innately French point of view, this wasn't a straightforward case of cultural difference. #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc ("squeal on your pig"), its French analogue, have been as seismic in France as they have been elsewhere; the outpouring of stories has even led to proposals for laws that would introduce fines for street harassment and extend the statute of limitations on assault cases involving minors. "That opinion piece, it's a bit the annoying colleague or the tiresome uncle who doesn't understand what's happening," another group of French women, led by the feminist politician Caroline De Haas, [wrote today](#) on Franceinfo, in a calmly dismissive demolition of the "dusty reminisces" of the *Le Monde* cohort. The women who signed the *Le Monde* piece are mostly, though not exclusively, white members of the professional and artistic classes: journalists, curators, artists, professors, psychoanalysts, doctors, singers. There aren't any housekeepers or bus drivers on the list, and there is no acknowledgment that things might be more complicated when a woman is not the leader of her professional team, as women so often are not. The concept of intersectionality, by which a feminist would concern herself with causes far wider than the persecution of a man whose "only wrong" was "to have tried to steal a kiss, to have spoken of 'intimate' things during a professional dinner," doesn't seem to have occurred to the signers.

Although there is a range of ages represented among the women, there is something of a generational tinge to the discussion. They object to the imposition of new rules on established figures. "Meanwhile, men are commanded to beat their breasts and dig up, in the depths of retrospection, any 'inappropriate behaviour they might have committed ten, twenty, or thirty years ago, and for which they must now repent," they say. I was reminded of a conversation I recently had with a French woman in her late sixties. Before her church wedding, in 1974, she told me, she had to submit to an interrogation of her sexual history by a priest. This made me realise what a wondrous event the sexual revolution must continue to seem to those whose lives were opened up by it. I wonder if those of us who were born later, who are fighting other battles, often underestimate the primacy of sexual liberation in the world view of previous generations.

I tell the story of being groped this summer in order to establish that I'm sympathetic to the idea that women can move on quickly from lesser instances of sexual harassment and assault. They can; I did. But I'm not so willfully unaware of the spectrum of human temperament and circumstance to ignore a woman's *right* to be traumatized by an incident like the one that happened to me. There are reasonable criticisms to be

made of the reckoning, as it's come to be called, but Deneuve and Millet and their co-signers distort them. Bothering women in an unwanted way isn't an expression of artistic temperament, without which the world would lose its magic. It's often a by-product of a man's (possibly very good) work making him think that he is invincible and owed. The hundred women's admiration for a certain kind of man inhibits their empathy for his victims. Their stance is all the sadder in that it reveals a diminution of the same human quality that kindles the sexual energy they're so keen not to see snuffed out. The failure to grasp that a woman—another woman with a different history, different values, a different set of likes and dislikes, attractions and repulsions—could grieve a trespass upon her body is really a failure of the imagination.