

MORAL PANIC: Biopolitics Rising  
by John Fekete  
Robert Davies Publishing, Montreal 1994  
383pp index \$21.99 sc  
Reviewed by PEG TITTLE

This was a difficult book to get through. First, I wanted to say, more than once, "Stop screaming at me--I can't focus on what you're saying!" It is a book about panic--written while in a state of panic.

Second, I wanted to taunt "So, now the shoe's on the *other* foot!" I *completely* agree with Fekete that making decisions on the basis of sex is wrong (see Rosenblatt's *The Apartheid of Sex*) and insofar as that's what biofeminism advocates, biofeminism is wrong. But it's not like we've been living in a meritocracy until now. "Biopolitics is fast *becoming* deeply integrated into the central politics of public policy and administration" (25, my emphasis)--becoming? It's *been* deeply integrated for a long time: as a matter of law, the right to vote was *determined by sex*; as a matter of academic policy, the right to attend university was *determined by sex*; as a matter of corporate policy, the chance of acquiring certain employment was *determined by sex*; hell, even responsibilities within private households were *determined by sex*! Biopolitics is, therefore, nothing new (and it is certainly not the child of biofeminists). It's strange that Fekete doesn't acknowledge the past at all. But hey, okay, that was then and this is now.

And I do applaud Fekete's attention to two big chunks of now. First, he discredits the commonly used violence against women statistics. In five very detailed chapters, he exposes sampling and generalization errors (e.g., the clinical population is the sample, but the statistics are presented as representing the whole population), interviewing errors (e.g., leading questions, unasked questions), tabulation errors (e.g., double-counting), and category errors (what has counted as violence may surprise some). When all is said and done, the popular '1 in 4' figure is incorrect; 1 in 17 or 1 in 50 (38) or 1 in 8 or 1 in 20 (341) is correct.

Fekete's analysis unsettled me so much (the book is worth reading for these five chapters

alone; as an aside, I'd like to see Fekete apply his rigorous statistical analysis to the studies of other interest groups--it'd be good to know, for instance, whether or not the panic about the environment is well-founded), I'll never believe any statistics, including his, until I've read the fine print of the original study; but if what he says is true, it is, of course, good news. I suspect, however, that what he says is not *completely* true.

Fekete focuses on three major Canadian surveys: DeKeseredy and Kelly who claim 81% of women are physically, sexually, and psychologically abused (50); the final report of the Canadian Panel on violence against women which claims "a global sexual violation rate of 98% of all Canadian women" (50); a Statistics Canada survey which claims that 51% of Canadian women have suffered from male violence since the age of 16" (51). These aren't the only studies to show that there is a problem.

To take one specific example, Fekete claims that the increase in batteries by husbands and boyfriends at Superbowl time is unfounded. But it is consistent with the "exhaustive study of heavyweight prizefights held between 1973 and 1978 and subsequent homicide statistics [that] showed that homicide in the U.S. increased by over 12% directly after heavyweight championship prizefights" (David Phillips, "The Impact of Mass Media Violence on U.S. Homicides", *American Sociological Review* [1983]:560-568) which is a study that has nothing to do with violence against women--is that statistic also incorrect and/or misleading?

However, even if I were to concede that there is *no* violence against women by men (hard to do when I've just seen, today, this is now, an advertisement for 'bitch skateboards' which shows the standard restroom male and female symbols figures standing side by side, the male figures holding a gun to the female figure's head, caption reading simply 'bitch'), that doesn't change other current manifestations of biopolitics that disfavour women: the female infanticide rate is much higher than the male infanticide rate, women with four years of post-secondary education earn less on average than men who have not completed high school; etc.

Furthermore, saying there is a worse problem with violence against men, as Fekete does (28, 67, 76, 86, etc.), is to commit the red herring fallacy: I'm sure that's true, but that doesn't change the

violence against women facts; it may suggest that attention is misdirected but special interest groups (of which biofeminism is one) exist to attend to a special, not the general, interest.

The second big chunk of now Fekete focuses on are the injustices going on in academia over sexual harassment. Through brief summaries of 14 cases and extensive summaries of 3 more, we see how on many campuses codes of behaviour are becoming extremely conservative, arguably violating some rights in the name of protecting others. The ideological aspects of this issue are quite complex and it's unfortunate (to me) that Fekete spends more time on case histories than on philosophical investigation. Others, however, are doing this necessary investigation, and with a broader focus (see for example, Phil Cox, "The Disputation of Hate: Speech Codes, Pluralism, and Academic Freedoms" in *Social Theory and Practice* [21.1 Spring 1995]:113-144).

One trend on campus is 'the expanding definition': it seems that sexual harassment need not be sexual--*sexist* harassment is probably a more accurate term; further, it need not be repeatedly harassing, one time is sufficient--*sexist offence* is therefore more accurate. This expanding definition is cause for concern. I agree with Fekete that "putting jokes, gestures, and graffiti into the same category as physical and sexual assault" (189) is not a good move. The verbal may be, like the physical, harmful. But is it *as* harmful? Should insults actually be illegal? I think not: I support the right to offend and be offended. I would've liked, therefore, a bit more analysis of the failure "to distinguish between the *systemic* level of social dynamics and what is more properly called *interpersonal* interaction" (190)--is the personal *always* political?

Another trend is the diminishing guarantee of due process along with its presumption of innocence; 'the student (if she's female) is always right'. Most of the case histories are first class horror stories of 'justice in action!'; but in spite of my own horror stories, I can't help thinking Fekete is tinting the telling somewhat.

So when Fekete claims that "the Canadian judiciary and legislators have sharply shifted legal procedures to favour complaints from women" (26), I groan and think to myself, 'you mean, to stop favouring men'. But his example is uncontestable: if men are to be held responsible for actions performed while intoxicated, so should women (currently, consent to sex given by a woman while

intoxicated 'doesn't count' and the man who then proceeds could be charged with sexual assault).

However, he criticizes the Supreme Court (Butler) for redefining 'harm to society' as 'harm to women'. One, he forgets that it *used to* mean 'harm to men' (rape was a crime because it damaged property owned by men). Two, he commits the error of dichotomous thinking when he assumes that harm to women necessarily *excludes* harm to men--it doesn't: explicit inclusion of women does not entail implicit exclusion of men! (And saying men are violent against women does not entail saying that women are not; it merely displays the interest of the group making the claim. If you are interested in the problem of violence against women *by women* (as some lesbian battering groups are), go ahead and make *that* your focus--not as a backlash though, but rather as another piece of the picture.) (And the point of gender neutral language is *not* to make men invisible [333]!)

Though I absolutely agree with Fekete's plea to root out biopolitics and change our world to a meritocracy (in which rights and responsibilities are based on individual ability, independent of 'membership' in groups based on biological attributes), I am left unclear about and unconvinced by the construction of Fekete's argument.

If he mean to show that *biopolitics* is rising, why did he focus almost exclusively on *biofeminism*? He mentions other manifestations--groups that demand decisions based on race, ethnic ancestry, and disability--but then essentially ignores them (except for a bit on disabled women).

If he meant to discredit biofeminism, why did he focus on only one aspect of it, violence against women (sexual harassment being, arguably, but according to biofeminists, violence against women). (Though one of Fekete's links between the two sections of his book is his declaration that 'intolerance of violence spreads to intolerance of verbal harassment' (167)--the slippery slope error.) Surely there's more to biofeminism than that.

Furthermore, why didn't Fekete clearly *define* biofeminism and distinguish it from other forms of feminism (if indeed biofeminism can be called a legitimate form of feminism, violating as it does what I thought was one of the core ideas of feminism--that men and women should be treated as individuals, not as members of a sex). Instead, Fekete puts the burden on *feminists* "whose

methods and practices are at variance with biofeminists...[to] advertise their differences from it" (14). Why does he assume *biofeminism*--unless otherwise *stated*?

If he meant to discredit feminism (and I often thought this was his intent; for example, he calls patriarchy a fiction (12) and he repeatedly neglects to qualify his statements to refer to *biofeminism*--more often he just says 'feminism' or 'feminists'), why focus exclusively on *biofeminism*?

If he meant to show that our society is in a state of moral panic, why did he focus on just two issues--violence against women and sexual harassment in academia? And why didn't he spend more time showing that these are indeed evidence of moral panic (and not something else, like Christian fundamentalism)?

If he meant to blame the current moral panic on biopolitics, or more specifically *biofeminism*, why didn't he clearly establish the necessary causal connections? Sometimes he seemed to be saying 'look, biofeminists are manipulating the data to support their agenda' (rather than 'look, biofeminists don't have good research skills' or even 'look, *these* biofeminists don't have good research skills')--which has nothing to do with moral panic; and sometimes he seemed to be saying 'look, biofeminists have rung the alarm, putting us in a state of panic which has made us *accept* incorrect and misleading statistics'--but didn't they ring the alarm *with* those statistics? (So because of the statistics, we accept the statistics?) And as for the eleven university campuses, I have not been convinced that *biofeminism* is responsible for their actions: much of the due process violations he describes seems to be typical bureaucratic incompetence and shitty workplace politics.

I'd like to make a few miscellaneous points before I close. One, I almost stopped reading the book when I read Fekete's assertion that without "the will and the power to violate, to transgress...we would be diminished beneath human dignity" (31); unfortunately he didn't develop this point further.

Two, one of the several assertions he makes in the last chapter is this: "the vengeance of an older generation of women against the active sexuality of the young has produced relentless hostility against men and unyielding panic among women" (327); but again, he did not develop (support) this

point.

Three, while Fekete hollers that biofeminists holler that 'all men are rapists', he, quite rightly, focuses on the truth of the claim; I think the impact of the claim also warrants some attention--we're all familiar with the labelling theory, are we not? What will the biofeminists do when their claim becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Perhaps I am one of those Fekete mentions, "surprised to discover that the dominant culture seems to have changed while they were not looking" (256); or perhaps the chip on Fekete's shoulder has led him, like the biofeminists he accuses, to commit the clinical fallacy and assume that the pathological population (biofeminists) is representative of the whole (feminists, women). Either way, *Moral Panic* is definitely worth the read.