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The Profits of (the Critique of) Patriarchy: On Toxic Masculinity, Feminism, & Corporate Capitalism in the Barbie Movie

Abstract

This article explicates the political, social, economic, and cultural contribution of *Barbie* (2023). Through a critical and normative analysis of four different prominent reviews of the film, this essay explores the quality of discourse surrounding *Barbie*, with particular emphasis on its feminist critique of toxic masculinity and lack of a coherent criticism of capitalism.

Keywords

Barbie, toxic masculinity, capitalism, feminism

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Cover Page Footnote

Bryant William Sculos, Ph.D. is a lecturer in the Dept. of Political Science at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and is the Politics and Culture section editor for *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. He is the author of *The Dialectics of Global Justice: From Liberal to Postcapitalist Cosmopolitanism* (SUNY Press, 2022) and the co-editor of *Teaching Marx & Critical Theory in the 21st Century* (Brill, 2019; Haymarket, 2020).

It has now been several months since the summer of *Barbie* (2023) began—and the hot takes, contemplative criticisms have all been logged—and people had a lot to say about this film. In part driven by a massive marketing campaign, which built on generations of Mattel’s advertising for the Barbie doll, the amount of commentary on this film is enormous. I’m confident that more has been said and written about the *Barbie* movie than perhaps any other film in decades. With that being the case, this review is structured around four representative reviews (including video commentaries and critical essays) of the film: Ben Shapiro’s video review¹, Krystal Ball’s video commentary², Tithi Bhattacharya’s essay in *Truthout*³, and Freddie deBoer’s *Substack* critique⁴. What is interesting is that despite the fact that we have a far-right anti-feminist, two left populists, and a neo-Marxist feminist social reproduction theorist, there are actually some overlaps among all four. There is perhaps more overlap between the left populists and Shapiro, but, as much as it pains the universe, there is overlap between the criticisms made by Shapiro and Bhattacharya—especially on the simplicity of the feminist critique presented.

Let’s begin with Ben Shapiro’s whiny tirade against *Barbie*. Despite his commentary’s intellectual vacuousness and general bad faith, it is likely that Shapiro’s perspective has been viewed by millions more people than any of the other three perspectives discussed here. For that reason alone it would be worth discussing. Unsurprisingly, his review is both unhinged and bigoted in typical Shapiro style—but what is surprising, like the proverbial broken clock, not everything he says is wrong. Let’s start with what he gets wrong.

First, Shapiro consistently applies a hyper-literal interpretive lens to what is an imaginative, quasi-surrealist, and at times absurdist film. It is a movie about a goddamn toy being a real person. But please Ben, tell us more about how the film isn’t perfectly linear, not everything is perfectly explained, and how some elements are less than realistic. No shit. This is the most ridiculous aspect of his review. Imagine watching a World War Two movie and finding out none of the actors were actually shot or killed—and then complaining that that made the film unrealistic. That’s the level of cultural sophistication Shapiro’s audience is graced with.

Second, much of Shapiro’s argument, and it is barely internally coherent enough to make general claims about it, is rooted in the belief that *Barbie* is a children’s movie (something his review shares with Ball’s). The film is rated PG-13, which is not a rating given to children’s movies. The previews at the theater both times I saw the film were even more adult than the *Barbie* movie was, with one exception: the forthcoming kid’s cop-agenda *Paw Patrol* movie. This animated film was likely being marketed to the parents who were seeing *Barbie*. Shapiro claims when he saw the film the theater was full of children. Maybe that’s true, but it was certainly not the case when I saw it on two separate weekends. Out of 50 or so people in the theater altogether, there were only four

¹ Ben Shapiro, “Ben Shapiro DESTROYS The Barbie Movie For 43 Minutes,” *YouTube* (July 2023): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynU-wVdesr0>.

² Krystal Ball, “Krystal Ball SKEWERS Barbie’s Late Stage Girl Boss Mess,” *Breaking Points* (July 2023): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCQdVQUXgSQ>.

³ Tithi Bhattacharya, “‘Barbie’ Lets Us Laugh at the Patriarchy, But Not at the Expense of Corporations,” *Truthout* (Aug. 2023): <https://truthout.org/articles/barbie-lets-us-laugh-at-the-patriarchy-but-not-at-the-expense-of-corporations/>.

⁴ Freddie deBoer, “No one is Kenough,” *Substack* (Aug. 2023): <https://freddiedeboer.substack.com/p/no-one-is-kenough>.

children there (across two showings). Everyone else appeared to be an adult. Putting audience composition aside, it isn't exactly clear what in the film was inappropriate for children. There would be a lot of references children wouldn't understand, but I suspect there were plenty of references a chunk of the adults didn't get either (the Proust Barbie comment is one example that comes to mind). There are sexual references in the film too, but they are all cleverly written to such a degree that if a child heard them and recognized them as being sexual that would mean that child was already well-aware of the sexual content being referred to (the back and forth argument between the Kens about "beaching each other off" is probably the best example of this). What kid, who wasn't aware of the original masturbatory slang, could have possibly recognized the meaning of the linguistic move from "beat off" to "beach off"? This is not a children's movie, but the studio's marketing choices leading up to its release suggest that they wanted some people to think that it was, because, why not? The more tickets sold the better. If the studio encouraged people to think that the movie was suitable for kids and adults (and it actually is), they did so to make money above all else. Marketing choices that draw people to the theater can shape how an audience perceives a film, but they can't reasonably be used as a basis for criticizing the internal quality of the film—don't tell that to Ben Shapiro or Krystal Ball. The fact that some people may have believed this movie about a little girl's toy was also suitable for children isn't surprising. But, at the same time, while it may have been uncomfortable for some adults to hear certain things in the presence of their children, if their children actually noticed the sexual references, the horse was clearly already out of the barn.

So then, what does Shapiro get right? Shapiro raises the portrayal of the Mattel Board of Directors in the film. In the film, the entire board is men. Attention is drawn to this fact through the dialogue and a roughly ten minutes scene with the board (who sporadically reappear throughout the second half). In fact, the real-life Mattel board is nearly half women (five spots out of eleven are occupied by women in 2023). Mattel also previously had a woman CEO for a long period. The film is not a documentary, so why does it matter that the Mattel board isn't actually all men? For one, it gives bad faith critics like Shapiro the ability to suggest, as he does, that any structural sexism or patriarchy that "the Left" claims exists in reality, only exists in fiction. However, as Ball suggests more coherently in her critique, the deeper problem is that the critique of patriarchy in the film is pervasively superficial. Would it have been more confusing to a lot of the liberal audience if the film was showing how corporations, while often male-dominated, even when they have near-equality among their corporate officers, still reproduce sexist ideas and cause all the same sorts of harms that private industry always does within capitalism? Yes, it probably would have.

To expand on Ball's argument, the problem with the portrayal of the Mattel board in the film is that it implies that sexism is the product of men being dominant in industry. And while it is a fact that corporations are still heavily male-dominated, a long-term reflection of patriarchal norms, it is also entirely possible for women to reproduce sexism and patriarchy. More significantly however, the misrepresentation of the Mattel board erases the vital connections between capitalism and patriarchy at a structural level. If sexism sells, then even women CEOs and boards of directors must pursue that profit. Ball says, quite rightly, that the radicalism level of the film is set to safe—safe for the innumerable brands with product placement in the film and wider marketing arrangements with *Barbie* and Mattel. Despite her anti-establishment left populism, Ball acknowledges that *Barbie* disproves the idea that is more widespread on the far-right: "go woke and go broke." *Barbie* has made well over a billion dollars.

Barbie is a liberal critique of sexism, but not much more. It had a lot of potential and critical interpretations of the film can point us to the intellectual and political value of a film by reading against the corporate intentions of its creators. One of the greatest strengths of Ball's critique, beyond her pointing to the erasure of any kind of serious critique of capitalism, is the broader political-economic context of the film's release: namely the ongoing labor activism in Hollywood. She recommends donating to the strike funds instead of seeing the movie. I'd suggest both. The movie is extremely well-done visually. The acting is great. The movie is consistently funny. You're not going to be sore from laughing harder than you've ever laughed before, but it is funny! And despite its entertaining qualities, because it tries to make some political interventions, we can continue to criticize it for the weaknesses of those political moves.

Appropriate given her expertise, Tithi Bhattacharya's critique of *Barbie* centers social reproduction, beginning with a contextualization of the timing of the film's release in the wake of a still-ongoing but far less socially and politically salient COVID-19 pandemic that drastically affected women disproportionately. The core of Bhattacharya's argument, not entirely different than Ball's, is that the film presents a simplistic conception of liberal feminism in that sense that despite showing women of various races, ethnicities, and body types, does not deal with the gendered character of labor, nor does it express anything approaching a complicated (i.e., accurate) presentation of the intersections of class and gender. Specifically, Bhattacharya says that the film ignores the particular experiences of working-class women: "When the glass ceiling is broken, who cleans up the shards from the floor? Amid the perfectly proportioned Black President Barbies, and superbly manicured surgeon Barbies, one wonders who cleans the Dream House, who wipes down the counters, who struggles with minimum-wage jobs." The film offers no critique of capitalism nor does it offer a critique of the role that women have played in reproducing the exploitative political economic system. Bhattacharya includes a fact that highlights the reality of the labor conditions behind the entire Barbie industry: "In 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* estimated an annual pay of \$6,300 for the average Mattel worker." Next, in something of a contradiction with the supposed grave concerns of liberal feminists given the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and trigger laws in Republican-controlled states in the US, Bhattacharya argues that the film doesn't touch on the recent derogation of reproductive rights. Lastly, she rightly questions how the film ignores the liberal feminist complicity in the horrific violence of US-led capitalist imperialism, asking, "...does the Black President Barbie order drone strikes on the Middle East?"

Certainly, on the issue of foreign policy, Bhattacharya is correct that this issue is ignored. This is less a problem for a film in general (not every film is required to do everything), but it is a problem for a film that is being hailed as a politically impactful feminist work. With respect to the lack of engagement with reproductive rights, the film does include repeated references to Midge, an apparently real Barbie that Mattel once tried to sell. The jokes throughout the film about this character are vague but seem to suggest this was a ridiculous concept to begin with; what girl wants to pretend to be pregnant, and what parent wants their daughter to be playing with that kind of doll? (though this point is only ever hinted at). This is a further example of the film's passivity on reproductive issues—but that isn't the same as ignoring them. Additionally, literally the last word of the film is "gynecologist." "I'm here to see my gynecologist." We should assume that this was intentional. Avoidant of the deeper issues of reproductive rights? Surely, but it is still significant. It raises the issue of sexual and reproductive health care. Does Barbie have insurance?

Is she paying out of pocket? How long did it take her to get an appointment? All questions this otherwise silly movie ignores—but I would be surprised to find out that even including this line as the last line of the film was viewed internally as something of a controversial choice. It isn't courageous, but it is a sign of the times: even the pinnacle of liberal feminist cinema of the year, if not the past decade, can barely broach the subject of reproduction with any kind of clarity or depth. Surely a decently creative writer could have included many pro-choice jokes throughout the film, but that possibility was denied. We can't know for sure if it was even suggested in the writers' room, but again I'd be surprised if it wasn't. We'd surely have ended up with a R-rated Barbie movie that made far far less money, instead of the still-excessive PG-13 rating it ended up with (seriously, despite Krystal Ball's contention otherwise, if a young kid recognized the sexual nature of a handful of jokes in the film, clearly that kid must have already been exposed to more adult material than is present in this movie).



(Source: Warner Bros/Buzzfeed News)

However subtle or unsatisfactory their presentations in the film may be, Bhattacharya also doesn't address the fact that we do actually see working-class women in the film, well, at least one delivery person pushing packages in Barbieland (maybe two additional sanitation workers as well—but isn't very clear). Yes, it is true that we never see the millions of household laborers, the majority of whom are immigrant women of color, represented in the film, but it is telling that there is at least one scene with a working-class woman. Tokenism perhaps, but the presence is noteworthy. Not even an entirely non-radical feminist film could justify ignoring a wider vision of what women's labor looks like and its relevance to maintaining society, even when such a society is meant to be viewed as a utopia.

To push this further, we never hear anything about wages in Barbieland, except for America Ferrara's character's infamous speech that wakes up the Barbies after they've been brainwashed by the Kens, a monologue that Bhattacharya refers to as a Hil[1]ary Clinton campaign speech" (sic)—which is most assuredly not a compliment. Perhaps we could read the film as showing, most certainly unintentionally, that there can be no true equality among women if the wages of women in different occupations are wildly unequal. Barbieland has political institutions and economic roles we would all recognize, but there is no disparity in quality of life. Still, Bhattacharya's key claim that the film implores its audience to work better within the system of capitalism, not to question the fundamental characteristics of this political economy that denies the vast majority of

women—of all people—an equitable standard of living and opportunity for a decent life, is spot on. “We get to laugh at the patriarchy but not fear corporations.”

Freddie deBoer’s essay takes a different tack, one that many leftist feminists might balk at, at least at first glance. Apparently deBoer is concerned with what might appear to be something more conservative than it is: individualism, particularly as it relates to intimate relationships (and other kinds of relationships). He argues that *Barbie*’s thesis, epitomized by the already-famous phrase from the film (and then put on a hoodie that Mattel immediately had for sale on its website, sold out and had to do a second round of pre-orders for), “I am Kenough,” means that not only can we, but we should or can only, become the best version of ourselves by ourselves, on our own. We don’t need each other. Who we are as a human being is enough. This critique by deBoer extends to a broader conversation about the crisis of masculinity among young men in the US. Young men are in many ways being left behind, economically, culturally, and politically. Something that young women experienced for generations, but we can see the consequences for young men and boys producing far more violence today, including suicides and school shootings (basically all of which are committed by young men). If we justifiably ignore the easy—but untrue—conclusion that men and boys are inherently more violent, we are left with a serious problem that contemporary capitalism has no answer for. *Barbie* doesn’t either. Sure, *Barbie* shows men that dominating women is both morally and practically problematic, but to just take care of yourself isn’t a productive alternative either. It is worth quoting deBoer at length here:

...by portraying therapeutic individualism as the only alternative to patriarchy, Gerwig has underlined the degree to which individualist capitalism now undergirds both sides of the American ideological divide. Ken absorbs a childish idea of patriarchy.... But the film teaches Ken that, indeed, rugged individualism is the right direction. After all, he is ‘Kenough’; he doesn’t need anyone else, and certainly not a partner in romantic love....[T]here’s two problems with that. The social problem is that rugged individualism degrades the kind of communal responsibility for each other that inspires people to (for example) end poverty. The individual problem is that telling people they are enough is a cruel thing to do, because they aren’t enough. None of us is enough.... Human beings need other human beings. All of us.... [Y]ou don’t get to choose to be self-sufficient, any more than you can choose to not require oxygen or water. We’re all interconnected in these vast webs of social influence and causality, whether we want to be or not, and very very few of us can last for long without relying on other people.

Reading the “I am Kenough” line and the surrounding plot and dialogue a bit more charitably, the phrase means that men don’t need to be with women or “get” the person they desire in order to be a worthwhile human being. Not that they are sufficient as they are, but they don’t need to prove anything to anyone else in order to be a full human being worthy of equal respect and dignity. “I am Kenough” can then be interpreted differently as a critique of the capitalistic toxic masculinity reproduced by figures like Gavin McInnis, Andrew Tate, and Donald Trump, and countless others in the conservative media sphere on TV, social media, and podcasts. “I am Kenough” is at its best

a starting point, not an end point. He isn't wrong that if it is treated as an endpoint, not a starting point (a distinction the movie doesn't make one way or another), it is a terrible social and political message. The concern by deBoer is that the film denigrates intimate couple relationships, heteronormative or otherwise. In the sense that it doesn't really show any healthy romantic relationships, he is absolutely correct. His interpretation is a reasonable one, but it isn't the only one. The absence in the film is palatable, but the film does point us toward that absence.



(Source: Mattel)

A motivated viewer might see the movie asking us, *if toxic masculinity and the relationships that perspective is desirous of are unhealthy and unacceptable, what is the alternative?* We aren't told, and deBoer isn't wrong to suggest that we should be thinking (and teaching young boys in particular) about what makes for a healthy, mutually-beneficial and personal growth-oriented relationship. We don't need to reify traditionalist or heteronormative ideals about the nuclear family in order to do this. In fact, we'd need to avoid precisely this. However, as deBoer argues, a lot of recent films, Disney films in particular, have entirely avoided their main characters having any kind of serious romantic relationships. The point isn't and shouldn't be to mourn the loss of the simplistic and chauvinistic (if not sexist) portrayals of male saviors or the idea that women need men to be fulfilled.

Barbie, again with the most charitable of interpretations, asks the question. Unlike the whitewashing of exploitative capitalism, about which no questions are asked by the film itself, the focus on gender relations is central to the film. And while the open question the film leaves us with might be unsatisfying or take too much creative reinterpreting, the film because of its content can still serve as a productive conversation-starter for our society. We've may have killed toxic masculinity—but now what? What's next? We should embrace this opportunity, but we must not ignore what Bhattacharya's critique highlights: that we cannot have a serious conversation as a society about toxic masculinity and its alternatives without also simultaneously exploring the crucial relationship between toxic masculinity and capitalism. And this isn't just a matter of salvaging some conception of romantic relationships. As the above quote from deBoer says, this kind of self-centered personal isolationism is politically problematic, especially for leftists. The

goals of the broadly socialist left cannot be achieved by isolated individuals focusing on themselves or believing that who they are and what they are on their own is sufficient. Enough in the sense of being deserving of a good, humane life—surely, but not sufficient. We are not enough to achieve the political, economic, social, and cultural goals of the Left. Not alone anyway.

Healthy romantic relationships of any kind can be an important part of what makes life meaningful for people. Not inherently, but for some these relationships are valuable and are worthy of encouragement and support. Comradely relationships. Close friendships. These too are critical. There is a wide range of forms of possible healthy relationships that can enhance each of us as individuals and enhance the power of our political movements. *Barbie* actually shows this value of close friendships and solidaristic relationships for achieving political goals (e.g., the Barbies working together to deprogram the other Barbies). How to do all-of-the-above is the perennial question for socialists within capitalism, and this is what deBoer, Bhattacharya, and Ball all agree on. The question of gender, social reproduction, and interpersonal relationships—romantic or otherwise—are always also a question of political economy. Shapiro is on a misogynistic ice flow by himself along with his millions of followers who are only interested in defending traditionalist and heteronormative relationships. As is also the case for any number of policy issues, it is crucial that the socialist left have better answers to the failures of liberal capitalism; otherwise the far right's toxic explanations and revanchist alternatives will be increasingly attractive to people, especially young men.