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Injustice For All: Understanding Power in the Era of Trump

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by Taylor Thomas

Once upon a time, a young, single mother married a charismatic young man she met in high school. Soon after tying the knot, she became a mother of two. Over the years, her initially loving relationship with her husband waned and he resorted to adultery. Later, he developed a drug habit that was supported through high stakes theft; millions of dollars' worth of theft, to be more precise. Upon learning about his criminal activity, the now middle-aged woman divorced her husband. This came after a decade of relentless neglect and emotional abuse. When she broke the news that she was leaving him, he did not like it; not one little bit. So, he huffed and he puffed and he trashed their house, tearing apart pictures and putting fist-sized holes in the walls. Fearing for the safety of the two children living in the home, a concerned relative alerted child services. Of course, when the case worker showed up, it was revealed that the complaint had, oddly enough, been filed against the mother. As it turns out, the concerned relative was actually a sibling to the husband. This sibling made false, if not altogether absurd, accusations against the mother, manufacturing stories to poison her image and restore the husband's reputation as a "God-fearing family man". Since her husband came from an affluent, influential family that maintained status within the community and the mother did not, she subsequently lost her home, custody of her youngest child, and all the respect she had struggled to maintain within her small town. A year later, her now ex-husband lost his temper and beat her within an inch of her life. She was bedridden for days, bruised and battered from head to toe. Her oldest daughter called the local police and begged them to intervene, but to her dismay, nothing was done. The mother was a nobody and the police officers were her ex-husband's high school drinking buddies. Good old boys simply don't arrest the people they played basketball and drained kegs with. That woman was my mother and her story is only one of many reasons why the recent appointment of Judge Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court came as no surprise to me.

The confirmation of Kavanaugh has left many sexual assault victims feeling a renewed sense of trauma as they've been forced to listen on as elite men in positions of power emphatically reject the word of individuals like Dr. Cristine Blasey-Ford. Downplaying the veracity of Dr. Ford's personal testimony, they have created an environment of unrestrained hostility towards survivors—one where coming forward with allegations requires that the accuser be willing to risk forfeiting their life, dignity, and humanity in order to tell their truth. Admittedly, I found myself reliving some of my own painful experiences last week, shivering every time Dr. Ford described the feelings of shame and helplessness I have been all too familiar with in my life. However, my experiences alone are not what prompt me to explore the issues related to Brett Kavanaugh's ascension to the Supreme Court. What motivates me now is a question that has unfortunately been avoided for far too long in much of our political discourse. That question revolves around one thing: power.

Philosopher Michel Foucault understood the significance of power in ordinary social relationships. Examining its operation in day to day interactions, Foucault stressed that power did not simply manifest within large-scale systems, but existed in ordinary human interactions. He once wrote that "Power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth." Here, we see a social paradigm in which individuals impose their power at the expense of others in their daily lives. In this way, power is multidirectional, strategic, and intrinsically relational. It isn't limited to the structures that govern us but thrives in our most elementary interpersonal relationships. Further, it blankets how we understand our very reality. For evidence of this, we need not look further than the incredulous way Dr. Ford's accusations were treated by both the president and leading members of the Senate. Dr. Ford was repeatedly denied equal consideration under the law because she lacked the type of power that Brett Kavanaugh clung to as he aggressively raged against what he saw as a violation against his right to have whatever he wanted without consequence. Further, the facts of the matter were tossed aside at every point of convenience. I've often heard that the truth will set you free, however, the Kavanaugh hearing wasn't about truth at all. It was about power and who has the right to use it.

As we've seen before with people like Donald Trump, when someone maintaining privilege and status is held accountable for their actions, they appropriate victimhood to suit their own circumstance,

insisting that challenging their right to take whatever they desire is somehow negating their basic human dignity. We can say this of individuals as elite as Brett Kavanaugh in the same way we can assert such of those as seemingly inconsequential as my stepfather. Like Kavanaugh, my stepfather violated the trust of those around him by implementing his power in obscene ways. He betrayed my mother, myself, and my little sister. Yet, rather than take responsibility for his actions, he took every family photo we had and tore them to shreds. He pouted, aggressively, and rebranded himself as an innocent victim scorned by a bitter woman. More than likely he thought, "How dare she do this to *ME*," never once acknowledging her forgiveness as something he was fundamentally not entitled to. In the end, his manipulative self-identification as a victim won in the eyes of my community. It was victorious for one simple reason: he had power. Much like Kavanaugh, my stepfather's background lent him undeserved social capital that he spent at the expense of others. It's been many years since I last saw the man who beat my mother, but I hear his life has gone on fairly uninterrupted. The life of his victim? Well, that's a different story and one that I don't have the strength to fully disclose here.

But wait, wasn't there a credible investigation into these accusations? Didn't the rule of law prevail and vindicate the honorable judge of all possible foul play? We have certainly been told that the investigation into Brett Kavanaugh's past only affirmed his right to serve amongst the top judiciary court in the United States. Senate Republicans concluded the investigation demonstrated exactly what they knew all along: the assault accusations were devoid of substance and Dr. Ford's testimony contained far too many holes to halt Kavanaugh's well-deserved confirmation. Majority leader Mitch McConnell asserted that it was all simply an elaborate attempt at character assassination; a leftist charade that was rightfully dismantled. However, everyone that isn't blind to the partisan rhetoric of the Trump administration knows that the FBI failed to find corroborating evidence because the investigation was specifically designed to uncover Kavanaugh's innocence, despite whether that involved willfully ignoring facts that might actually lead to the truth. Such a disingenuous outcome isn't surprising since the Trump administration regards truth as a matter of interpretation. This time, they ignored the facts to manufacture a story of false victimhood and actively vilified a brave woman in order to paint Kavanaugh as a virtuous man tarnished and undone by petty lies and partisan politics. He was stripped of due process, they claimed. His life was nearly ruined, they screamed for all, including the countless victims of assault tuning in from across the nation, to hear. Senator Lindsay Graham vociferously refuted the accusations as a manipulative sham on the Senate floor, decrying his hope that Democrats never gain the power they so hungrily seek. However, Democrats are the very ones who asked for a legitimate investigation when the accusations first appeared. It was Republicans, in their effort to clear the vote and take control of the third branch of government, who rushed the process and made a mockery out of one traumatized woman's dignified pleas for justice. Since the confirmation, Trump has continued to demonize Dr. Ford while simultaneously declaring men across the country to be the real victims. "Women are doing great" he noted in a press conference, seemingly unaware of the tremendous irony in someone who has been accused of sexual assault twenty-two times casually dismissing the gravity of sexual violence in America.

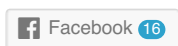
In all, the appropriation of victimhood by Brett Kavanaugh and his reported stripping of due process is an allusion fabricated by congressional voices who sought to confirm a Supreme Court justice without thoroughly investigating the serious allegations against him. This is certainly a miscarriage of justice, but the victim here isn't who individuals like Trump want you to believe it is. The real victim is every man and woman who has ever opened up about their assault, only to be greeted with doubt and apathy. It is the powerless who continually fall prey to the powerful with no one to speak up in their defense. What is now even more intolerable is the simple fact that most conservatives who continue to support Donald Trump refuse to acknowledge the role race, gender, and sexuality play in deciding who gets to exercise power in this country. On that note, allow me to be very blunt for a second and ask a few crucial questions. Does anyone really believe for an instant that Kavanaugh's status as a wealthy, white, heterosexual male has nothing to do with the outcome of the hearing? Am I really to assume that we are a country where due process is honored when every year innocent young men of

color are gunned down and killed by the police for the crime of being black in America? Where is their due process? Was Tamir Rice granted the same presumption of innocence before a group of adult men, all of whom supposedly represented law and order, filled his 12-year-old body with bullets? Who is speaking up for the poorest among us rotting in prison because they couldn't afford adequate legal representation? But sure, keep telling me that "innocent until proven guilty" is a principle that is equally distributed despite one's orientation in a social reality that penalizes minority groups for simply having the audacity to exist.

Tragically, we live in a culture where predation is rewarded and accountability is only required of the powerless. As comedian Bill Maher recently noted in an episode of *Real Time*, "Power begets power." Power also begets reality, as Foucault already pointed out, and the reality we currently operate within is controlled by an elite minority who demand justice of everyone but themselves. Kavanaugh's behavior, both as a young man and as an unhinged Supreme Court nominee, was tolerated because we've been collectively conditioned to identify such as a natural part of the male experience. It is an unquestioned part of our current reality. Every day, the imposition of power at the expense of the powerless is overlooked because it has become a cultural norm. This glaring inequality is reinforced by a legal system that protects the privileged and condemns the victimized. Perhaps we will not succeed in identifying the locus of this perverse power in a single election cycle. In fact, we may never fully understand what it means to acknowledge our respective privileges and utilize the particular power we each harness with total responsibility. However, one thing is certain: America is rapidly changing and an increasingly disgruntled citizenry is rising up out of obscurity to demand justice. Right now, we are seeing how privileged people react when their claim on near absolute authority is challenged. My suggestion is that we keep on rocking the boat.

Taylor Thomas is a second-year MTS student focusing on theology and philosophy of religion. She likes music, Spider Man, and pineapple pizza (pineapple not optional).

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