"When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less," said Humpty Dumpty to Alice. That was once thought to be a joke, but now Humpty’s dubious lexicographical privilege heads up the bill of feminist demands against the general — or, as they would have it, the "patriarchal" — culture. In particular, the self-styled women’s champions are demanding that the word "slut" should henceforth mean — well, they’re not quite sure what, but anyway something other than what it does mean. It’s the least that we oppressors can do for them, it seems, allowing them to "reclaim" the word for their own purposes, whatever those may be.

According to last Saturday’s Guardian their campaign got started as a result of a feminist backlash against a Toronto policeman’s warning to a group of female students that, "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized." Of course, the cop was immediately forced to issue a groveling apology for (as the conventional feminist wisdom puts it) "blaming the victim," but this wasn’t enough for some feminists, who have since been busy organizing a series of demonstrations advertised as "SlutWalking" — which, besides just "being a slut and getting pissed off" seems to involve "reappropriating" the word "slut."

Some feminists think this is going too far. Writing in yesterday’s Guardian, Gail Dines and Wendy J Murphy, though they are completely in sympathy with the anti-discretion sentiments of the demonstrators and buy into the "blaming the victim" meme, find that the demonstrations are not particularly helpful.

The organisers claim that celebrating the word "slut", and promoting sluttishness in general, will help women achieve full autonomy over their sexuality. But the focus on "reclaiming" the word slut fails to address the real issue. The term slut is so deeply rooted in the patriarchal "madonna/whore" view of women’s sexuality that it is beyond redemption. The word is so saturated with the ideology that female sexual energy deserves punishment that trying to change its meaning is a waste of precious feminist resources.

In today’s Guardian, the ding-dong continues with "SlutWalking is rooted in riot grrl attitude," by Ray Filar, on how "SlutWalking harks back to the feminist punk spirit of the early 1990s."

Gail Dines and Wendy J Murphy have quite rightly pointed out that the right to be called
"slut" is not the be-all and end-all of feminist activism. But no one is suggesting it is. This move to embrace the word as a term of positive sexuality may currently be traveling across the world to the tune of the marching band, but it harks back to the dawn of the 1990s when musician Kathleen Hanna, unwilling figurehead for the riot grrrl movement and lead singer for Bikini Kill, went on stage with the word "slut" scrawled across her body. In doing this, she made a visceral, powerful statement about her sexuality. Her message was not "yes, I am a slut." It was this: "by reclaiming the derogatory terms that you use to silence my sexual expression, I dilute your power."

Except that, of course, she didn’t. As Mr Filar himself admits: "Unfortunately, not everybody got the memo." That tends to be the problem, doesn’t it, with Humpty Dumpty-style announcements of unilateral attempts to make words mean what you want them to mean? But the fantasy on which feminist politics is founded — like Marxism or the proposal to abolish rape by political fiat instead of making it less likely by taking ordinary prudential precautions — never seems to be discredited by its failures.

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