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## Book Review: Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women and Sex, Art, and American Culture

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# BOOK REVIEW

Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*

Camille Paglia, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*

By Charles Angell

Two recent books receiving widespread attention and best-seller notoriety suggest, when read in sequence, that the women's movement is either being squeezed dry by male pressure or sucked dry by intellectually barren feminists. Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* and Camille Paglia's *Sex, Art, and American Culture* criticize the women's movement, albeit from quite different premises, for its failure to make and secure advances in women's rights and opportunities the movement likes to claim for itself. The oft-quoted Paglia (who, if she possesses nothing else, possesses a genius for epigrammatic one-liners) unleashes a verbal scud attack at contemporary feminists for refusing to recognize the elemental force of sex and the controlling power of the male ego. Sneering at the social constructionism that she sees influencing most schools of feminist thought, the notion that our gender identities are culturally, not biologically, constructed, Paglia argues that such ideas lead women who should know better into situations -- like date rape -- from which common sense would have protected them. Faludi, a more moderate voice, undertakes a thoroughgoing examination of how American society, through its mostly male-dominated media, fashion, and entertainment industries, has effectively blunted, and in some instances reversed, women's movement away from the home into the workplace.

In fact, Faludi's early chapter, "Man Shortages and Barren Wombs: The Myths of the Backlash," neatly dissects a number of economic and sociological studies conducted during the 1980s, which purported to demonstrate that women who remained single in order to pursue a career were quite likely to suffer depression, show signs of overstress, risk infertility, and condemn themselves, as they grew into their mid- to late

thirties, to spinsterhood owing to an acute shortage of eligible men. The career woman who refused to accept the pattern of marriage, home and family, who subverted the order of things, would have to pay a penalty. As it turns out, Faludi might well have titled her chapter "Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics," for as she probes into how the various studies were conducted, she finds skewed sampling, partial data, and controversial methodologies. The man shortage turns out not to exist. The poverty of divorced women, given wide circulation by Lenore Weitzman's *The Divorce Revolution*, is much exaggerated. One study concluded that the stress of full-time careers brought women to depression and led even to infertility. Faludi is able to show that women pursuing careers consistently evidenced greater satisfaction with their lives than women who remained home. Evidence that working women risk infertility simply does not exist. Nonetheless, when the reports were issued, the media seized upon and disseminated their conclusions. Shere Hite's *Women and Love*, wherein appears the much-reported man shortage, typifies the sort of study that Faludi faults for misrepresenting the problem and misleading the public. Even when the authors of some studies amended their original findings or reinterpreted their data using less controversial methods, the new and often less sweeping conclusions were never given the prominence of the earlier, more sensational findings. Faludi herself concludes that these studies advanced flawed hypotheses about the risks women were thought to bring upon themselves by stepping outside the home and entering traditionally male occupations. She contends that the greatest threat to women's well-being is the backlash that the reports produced.

Most of Faludi's study details how the backlash manifests itself through America's popular culture organs. "These so-called female crises," she writes, "have had their origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising -- an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false image of womanhood." Her chapter on the Hollywood film industry, which can be cited as representative of Faludi's methodology, documents how several recent films consistently portray women as victims or psychotics, often brutally punished for any movement beyond a narrowly circumscribed role. Faludi describes how *Fatal Attraction*, originally an hour long screenplay written for British television and concerned principally with the moral issues of the husband's infidelity, became in the Hollywood version a stark portrayal of a woman deranged by lust and rage. The producers went so far as to add to the script -- she didn't appear in the British original -- a dutiful and patient wife to underscore the point that a woman driven by desire and scorned by a married lover would turn like a Fury on her own kind. The Hollywood version demands that the wronged but forgiving wife must finally slay this threat to her domesticity, emphasizing for the audience that no role exists for the older, single, career woman beyond that of a monster. The independent woman is a subversive woman. Film after film, Faludi tells us, transmits this message.

*Backlash* belongs to the large body of writing that chronicles how social institutions respond to the tensions produced whenever women seek opportunities and advancement commensurate with men. Working women often find themselves enmeshed not only by the expectations of a predominantly male workplace but also by an awareness that success requires simultaneous recognition and

repudiation of those expectations. Even Faludi inadvertently found herself enmeshed. In an otherwise straightforward *Boston Globe* interview, Joseph Kahn gratuitously noted that Faludi's hemline "is fashionably above the knee. But you need not tell her that we mentioned that" (*Globe*, 13 October 1992, 61). We? Even when a woman, at least in her appearance, conforms to expectations, a man will make certain she remains aware of the constraints which hem her in.

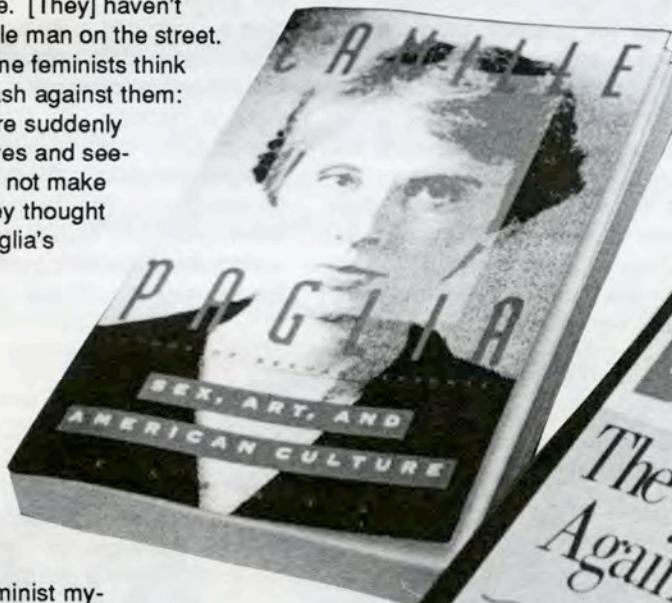
No such constraints entangle Camille Paglia who likely regards hemming and hawing as immoral. Reading the articles, reviews, and addresses collected in *Sex, Art, and American Culture* compares to wrestling verbal alligators. Paglia, who Faludi claims was motivated to attack contemporary feminists out of the "simple spite" of an "embittered anti-feminist academic," has no truck with backlash notions. In her *Globe* interview with D. R. Denison, Paglia calls feminists "incredibly naive ... because they think men will change. [They] haven't changed a single man on the street.

That's why some feminists think there's a backlash against them: because they are suddenly opening their eyes and seeing that they did not make the changes they thought they made." Paglia's

them. This "she-asked-for-it" defense of anti-social, if not criminal, sexual aggression nearly validates the victimization and brutality women experience in so many of the movies Faludi criticizes. But Paglia, eager to condemn the sexual impotence of contemporary feminists, emphasizes the predatory and anarchic power of sex. "Pursuit and seduction are the essence of sexuality. It's part of the sizzle. Girls hurl themselves at guitarists ... The guys are strutting. If you love rock and roll as I do, you see the reality of sex, of male lust and women being aroused by male lust. It attracts women. It doesn't repel them." Paglia's enthusiasm for rock and roll, Mick Jagger particularly, and its smoldering sexuality undergirds her notion -- I hesitate to call it a theory -- that our popular culture icons, rock and film stars, represent contemporary society's incarnation of the ancient deities and their sexual license. Woody Allen and Mia Farrow

reprise Tereus and Philomela. In this scheme of things, women for Paglia embody the chthonic, a favorite Paglia word meaning the realm of misrule and chaos, and its subversion of form and order, values she perceives as essentially male. It's this view that has Paglia enthusing about Madonna's polymorphous sexual role-playing.

*Sex, Art, and American Culture* includes the full spectrum of Paglia's ideas and opinions. Reading them one sees her for what she is, not so much an embittered anti-feminist, but a dedicated teacher with a love, as she said in her *60 Minutes* interview, of performance. Her taking up the cudgels against academic feminists is part of her program for reforming higher education and eliminating those features like the demand to publish, the conference circuit, the toadying to trendy ideas which overwhelm thought and creativity. She is an iconoclast and gadfly and does paint herself into what some would term untenable, others untenurable, positions. She's a furious read who, when read in company with Faludi, reminds us of the simple truth that so long as women are compelled to live lives of such ambivalence, their mouths of outrage will not be sealed.



contempt for feminist myopia underlies her controversial statements, included in the current collection, on date rape. "A woman going to a fraternity party is walking into Testosterone Flats," she argues, "full of prickly cacti and blazing guns ... A girl who lets herself get drunk at a fraternity party is a fool. A girl who goes upstairs with a brother at a fraternity party is an idiot. Feminists call this 'blaming the victim.' [I] call it common sense." Though Paglia makes explicit her condemnation of rape under any circumstances, she comes perilously close to suggesting that in some circumstances women provoke the sexual violation inflicted on