

The Feminist Mystique

BY KAREN LEHRMAN

Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women by Susan Faludi

(Crown, 552 pp., \$24)

Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem by Gloria Steinem

(Little, Brown, 377 pp., \$22.95)

“We intend simply to be ourselves,” declared Marie Jenney Howe in the early part of this century. “Not just our little female selves, but our whole big human selves.” Howe was the founder of Heterodoxy, a kind of primitive consciousness-raising group in Greenwich Village that demanded only that its members not have orthodox views. Above all, Heterodoxy urged an escape from the cramping classification of “woman,” which was being imposed not only by male-dominated society, but also by the “woman movement” of the late nineteenth century. “Woman” was defined by her duties to men, society, God. A feminist’s duty, these fiercely individualistic women believed, was primarily to herself.

Heterodoxy deserves to be rescued, especially these days, from the dustbin of history. For in its zeal to abolish women’s “little” femaleness, our own women’s movement has ended up trapping women in a big femaleness, in a grandiloquent collective identity. Women’s ability “simply to be ourselves” has been undermined in the process. But we may again be at the kind of turning point that prompted the birth of Heterodoxy and won it discontented, independent members, eager to pursue the cause of women’s equality—on their own terms.

Women (and men) today endorse many or most of the basic goals that belong under the broad banner of feminism: equal job and education opportunities, the same pay for the same work, shared domestic work, access to child care—the prerequisites to overall equality and justice for women. Yet most women (and men) are unlikely to call themselves feminists, to want to be part of any sort of radical, self-conscious movement whose primary purpose is to secure women’s rights. The reigning explanation for this discrepancy is

summed up in what has suddenly become the feminist buzzword for the 1990s: backlash.

In her best-selling book by that title, Susan Faludi, a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, argues that over the past decade women have confronted a concerted cultural and intellectual effort to turn back the progress of women’s liberation. She chronicles the daunting extent of the phenomenon, which began with the New Right and now extends into our underwear drawers. The backlash, according to feminists, has succeeded in again turning “feminist” into a dirty word, in making all feminists out to be whiny, shrill, man-hating, ugly.

There is, however, another and contradictory explanation for women’s rejection of the label: women believe that they are strong, independent, and can do it all on their own. Or at any rate they believe that the kind of help offered by the organized women’s movement is at best beside the point. To some degree this skepticism is a measure of the feminist movement’s success. Yet underlying it is a deep discomfort with the orthodoxy of the movement, with a mentality that conceives of only one kind of feminist.

There is equal discomfort with the fundamental tenet that launched the movement in the 1960s: that the “personal is political.” In other words, the quest for women’s individual advancement does not belong in the private sphere, because for women there is no private sphere: the entirety of our lives has been shaped by political oppression. According to this analysis, the solutions to our problems, from domestic violence to eating disorders, are to be found in society. Ironically, this feminist doctrine has promoted an adversarial stance that has all too often burdened women with precisely the status they have been struggling to escape: the status of victim.

It is also an approach that, in focusing so intently on the public sphere, has tended to ascribe to women goals that they don’t necessarily have, and more important, to deny the domestic concerns that they most certainly do have. Concerned about those omissions, such high-profile feminist revisionists as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Susan Brownmiller, along with “relational” scholars in academia, have offered another explanation of feminism’s fading appeal. “First-stage” feminism, they began arguing a decade ago, has run its course, and the time has come to shift to a “second stage,” which would correct for the zealous oversimplifications that helped to launch the crusade for women’s rights. Women are different from men, they have argued, and there is such a thing as a “woman’s sphere,” in and through which women can and should exert influence. Taking this line of thought to its extreme, Suzanne Gordon has recently argued in *Prisoners of Men’s Dreams* that equal opportunity feminism must be replaced by “transformative feminism”: women’s goal should be to change capitalism into a system based on caring, not competition.

Now another grande dame of feminism has retreated to the personal realm, in a very different way. In *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*, Gloria Steinem attributes most of women’s problems to external factors, but as her title suggests, her cure is internal. In place of the relational feminists’ emphasis on distinctively female characteristics, Steinem, like the early feminists, focuses on self-completion, reclaiming women’s strong, independent, assertive side. But she too has joined the growing chorus urging that the political be personalized.

Faludi would dismiss these revisionisms as the unwitting product of “backlash,” as a sad sort of entrenchment that has emerged from the onslaught by the media, government, and industry on the whole idea of equality for women. And certainly “second-stage” thinking is guilty of treading too close to a pernicious, retrograde view of women (in addition to subscribing to a facile criticism of capitalism). But the mystique of the backlash, and the reception of Faludi’s book, which is being hailed as “feminism’s new manifesto,” are perhaps the best evidence of the limitations of traditional, first-stage feminism. Although Faludi’s credo ostensibly endorses individualism and self-assertion—she invokes Nora’s declaration in *A Doll’s House*, “Before everything else I’m a human being”—the truth is that her book is a good indication of

how far modern-day feminism has strayed from its classically liberal foundations. The ready embrace of an external enemy, and the insistence on an aggressively collective response to that enemy, may have served the movement well at its origins in the '60s; but the strategy seems to have exhausted its usefulness, not to mention its accuracy as a description of women's predicaments. It has hardened feminism into a rigid orthodoxy that will readily disparage women's free choice if it conflicts with the movement line. And, ironically, it has been destructive not only to women as individuals, but to the cause of true equality.

Faludi's indictment is sweeping: the method of the backlash has been to convince women that feminism has proved to be our own "worst enemy," that too much independence is making women miserable—that all of our problems are, in fact, personal. Her substantiation is equally exhaustive. Case by case, she sets out to show that the backlash has tried to persuade the public that the liberation of women is responsible for female burnout, "toxic" day care, an infertility epidemic, the man shortage, depression, stress-induced disorders (hair loss, bad nerves, alcoholism, heart attacks, anorexia/bulimia, adult acne), and loneliness. Yet "these so-called female crises," writes Faludi, "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 images of womanhood."

It is not Faludi's evidence—a dizzying array of examples, anecdotes, and studies—that is dubious; it is her argument about the motives that have generated the evidence and the responses that have greeted it. Though her account is full of qualifiers, it is basically a conspiracy theory. Faludi essentially implies that a cabal of villains has been at work successfully intimidating a large class of victims: women.

The book's most solid and disconcerting section is on the media, in which she debunks the myths underlying each of the decade's big trend stories: the man shortage, the infertility epidemic, the mommy track, the day care crisis. Not only was feminism not responsible for the latest "female" problem, but there often was no problem at all. And when there was a problem, it was usually men who were the cause. For example, the "biological clock" crisis was spawned by a study—sponsored by a federation of artificial insemination centers—that looked only at French women who were mar-

ried to completely sterile men and were trying to get pregnant through artificial insemination; the research scientists never meant the findings to apply to all women. According to sounder studies, Faludi writes, women in their early 30s face only a slightly greater risk of being infertile than women in their early 20s, and the infertility rate is actually lower among college-educated and higher-income women.

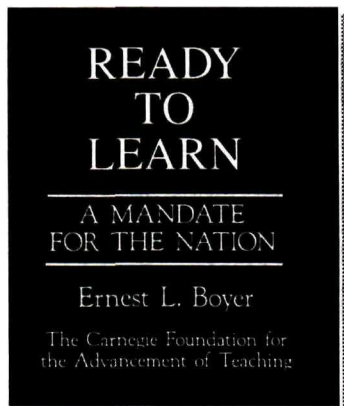
When she turns to the entertainment industries, Faludi offers some concrete evidence to support the charge that at least in some cases there has been an explicit agenda at work, and that the agenda is not simply the province of the backwater right. She has unearthed examples of shows being canceled or scripts being rewritten solely to reflect the more "traditional" values of a producer: single women or working women had to be portrayed as evil or miserable, mothers as both good and happy.

Yet it is quite a leap to the conclusion that the (putatively liberal) media as a whole were out to get women during the '80s, that all promotions in the media or on the screen of "family values" stemmed from a sinister sexism. Moreover, Faludi neglects to mention all of the articles inspired by debates over Eurocentrism, date rape, and pornogra-

phy, which can just as easily be ascribed to the rise of political correctness that supposedly infiltrated the media at the same time as the backlash.

In any case, an emphasis on "family values" in the second decade of feminism's ascendancy is not all that surprising; nor, for that matter, is the right wing's cynical manipulation of the term. The rise during the 1980s of single-parent families, drug use, violence, and divorce rates made the fate of the family a legitimate concern. And the focus on women's "lifestyle" predicaments doubtless reflects at least in part the rise of women to positions of formative authority in some of the media. To address the tensions that have been one result of women's changing aspirations is hardly an anti-feminist enterprise; to address them superficially, sensationally, misleadingly is hardly a new development in journalism or in Hollywood.

Clearly change has not come painlessly or pervasively, but it is Faludi's implicit expectation that somehow it should have that makes her book disappointingly schematic and off-puttingly defensive. She extends her backlash umbrella over practically every cultural event of the '80s, from Andrew Dice Clay to the relational feminists. Following the traditional feminist impulse, Faludi



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seems to have felt that she needed to exaggerate just how persecuted women are. If you look hard enough, of course, anything can be seen as a reaction to feminism, and Faludi is a good reporter.

Perhaps the best examples of this kind of reductionism lie in her chapters on the fashion and beauty industries—the standard targets of feminist ire. Faludi claims that the “High Femininity” design trend of the ’80s was a literal response to the women’s movement. Promoting “punitively restrictive clothing” (e.g., miniskirts), designers evidently thought, would not only hamper women’s advancement, but force them to buy lots of clothes again: dress them like little girls and they will follow the dictates of fashion. The likelihood that merchandisers were simply responding to a major downturn in the market with a new gimmick apparently eludes her. Instead she herself seems to subscribe to the condescending logic underlying their supposed strategy. In one of her frantic, humorless anxiety attacks about the ominous impact of the trend, she writes: “But was Lacroix offering women ‘fun’—or just making fun of them?”

Faludi then devotes six pages to a discussion of the “Intimate Apparel Explosion,” as though it could end life in America as we know it. She doesn’t like neo-Victorian lingerie (she prefers Jockey’s for Her). In fact, she doesn’t like neo-Victorian anything, seeing it as yet another way to turn women into brainless statuettes. She lambastes designers who propose that it is good that women feel secure enough to dress in more feminine clothes again.

Whether or not the designers are being sincere, the point is that they are right. Women no longer have to choose between femininity (or sexuality) and equality. But Faludi doesn’t seem to get this. “Late-’80s lingerie celebrated the repression, not the flowering, of female sexuality. The ideal Victorian lady it had originally been designed for, after all, wasn’t supposed to have any libido,” she writes without irony. (She has plenty of company; remember the feminist outcry over Florence Griffith Joyner’s lace running tights in the ’88 Olympics.) Of course most haute couture is preposterous and unwearable; that’s the point of it. Moreover, the miniskirt is not a modern form of foot binding. (In fact, it first made a splash in the ’60s, in the heady early days of women’s liberation.) Feminists are so intent on not having society judge women by the way we look that they end up challenging the right to allow one’s looks to reflect one’s individuality. And isn’t there something slightly confused about feminists complaining in

one breath that the new fashions call for more full-figured models (further evidence of the effort to promote a barefoot and pregnant mindset) and continuing to complain in another breath that our beauty standards encourage anorexia?

But Faludi’s implicit model of women as victims is perhaps most distorting when it comes to her conclusions. The rhetoric, the tone, the drama, and the sheer weight of her book lead one to believe that the backlash was quite successful in determining women’s fate during the ’80s. But Faludi’s own facts tell a far more complicated story. Women spurned nearly every effort that was made (according to Faludi) to push them back into the kitchen, from watching TV shows with “nesting goodwives” to buying garter belts and teddies. In fact, they continued to increase their participation in the work force each year in record numbers. As Faludi herself writes: “No matter how bruising and discouraging her collisions with the backlash wall, each woman in her own way persisted in pushing against it.”

The problem is that Faludi doesn’t fully acknowledge women’s actual responses until her epilogue, where she adds that “this quiet female resistance was the uncelebrated counterpoint to the anti-feminist campaign of the ’80s.” But it is nowhere less celebrated than in her own book. Writing this in the introduction would have undermined her portrayal of women as helpless, passive victims of society’s devious designs. And indeed, Faludi goes out of her way to disparage what women can do individually to improve their lot: “To remove the backlash wall rather than to thrash continually against it, women needed to be armed with more than their privately held grievances and goals. Indeed, to instruct each woman to struggle alone was to set each woman up, yet again, for defeat.”

For the same reason, in order for Faludi to counter the backlash’s premise that all women’s problems are personal, the message of *Backlash* had to be: working women have no personal problems. After expertly demolishing the media’s hyped-up myths, Faludi fails to acknowledge that in many cases when you peel away the layers of hype, you find kernels of truth. She might have devoted at least a few sentences, for example, to the fact that, infertility statistics aside, the physical experience of childbearing tends to be easier on a woman in her early 20s than on a woman in her late 30s. And in debunking the “toxic” day care myth (one of the most commonly quoted studies used monkeys as subjects), she

implicitly makes extreme and dubious assertions of her own: that children don’t get sick more often in day care; that day care doesn’t diminish maternal bonds; that there is no harm whatsoever to infants.

The truth is that women do have personal problems, some of which are the direct result of changes in women’s expectations and opportunities. But these problems no more make us the victims of feminism than our continuing inequality makes us the victims of backlash. Moreover, acknowledging the existence of these problems does not represent defeat. As if Faludi has never talked to a woman who works, the implication of her analysis is that working women do not suffer from burnout, stress-related ailments, depression, lack of self-esteem. It’s no doubt true, as she shows through numerous studies, that single women and working women are in better mental health than mothers who work in the home. But that doesn’t mean that balancing domestic and professional desires and duties is painless. As feminists and Faludi herself rightly argue, working women’s lives would be considerably more manageable if housework and child care could be shared equally with men, and if women no longer felt they had to work twice as hard as their male colleagues to prove their worth.

Clearly there is no single path to such equitable arrangements. But the expectation that most of the solutions will come from an organized single-constituency group has been proving its inadequacy every day. Of course women internalize a lot of sexist stereotypes—parents who discourage independence, teachers who ignore us, employers who demean us, husbands who abuse us—and of course years of this will wear down our ability to assert our demands, our will to walk away from bad situations. But so will thinking of ourselves as victims. We need to recognize and to resist external evils, but we don’t need to exaggerate them. Pornography, for example, has become a feminist metaphor for everything that besets women in the social sphere; attempts to censor it exclusively for the welfare of women are *real* manifestations of neo-Victorianism, though Faludi curiously never mentions them. Moreover, we don’t need external evils to become our excuses. Just as we don’t excuse men for hurting others by blaming their “socialization,” we shouldn’t excuse women for hurting themselves.

Facile invocations of “self-esteem” are no cure for women’s problems, despite all the books, including Steinem’s, that promise the contrary. Her suggestions

for gaining a sense of control over one's life turn out to be just as banal and passive and victim-oriented as the non-solutions offered by traditional feminists. Instead of striking out on our own, Steinem wants us to turn deep within ourselves. She seems to have fully accepted today's trendy self-help theories: to salve our wounded "core" self-esteem (that which optimally comes from unconditional parental love), all we need to do is "reparent our inner child," develop our spontaneous, creative sides, discover our "future selves." In tired, New Age psychobabble ("Each of us has an inner compass that helps us know where to go and what to do"), Steinem concocts a familiar brew of self-actualization, co-dependency, and spiritualism. In such an analysis, the same danger presents itself: the danger of turning explanations into excuses, of seeing ourselves as victims not just of society but of our childhood.

Yet there is a useful underlying message in Steinem's book: that women can start thinking of themselves as "I" rather than "We." And in doing so, they can cast off the emphasis on the collective, victim psychology that characterized first-stage feminism, as well as the celebration of uniquely "feminine" thinking and feeling that was one legacy of second-stage feminism. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton asserted in "Solitude of Self," her 1892 speech before the U.S. Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage: "The strongest reason for giving woman ... a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition ... is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life. ... Nothing adds such dignity to character as the recognition of one's self-sovereignty."

For victim psychology does not just hurt women personally and professionally. It also hurts them politically. Feminists claim that they don't like to be called "women and other minorities," that they don't want to be considered a "special interest." But given the way that they have chosen their issues, the way that they have lumped them under the heading "women's issues" and made them the special responsibility of female candidates, and the way that they have disparaged any idea that doesn't descend from the top tier of collective feminist thought, they can't expect much else. Feminists' obsession with "gender consciousness" has not only fostered a bemused animosity among both women and men, it has also reinforced prescribed gender roles, forcing women to confront the same negative feelings that were smothering our feminist fore-

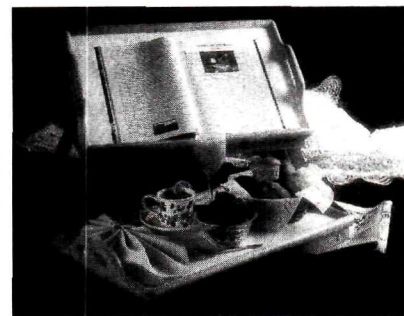
mothers. "I want my work considered as mine, not as some tour de force or bit of presumptuous rivalry on the part of an eccentric member of an excluded group," the writer Miriam Allen de Ford declared in the late 1920s. "I want to stand before the world and say: 'I am myself. I have defects, weaknesses, and faults. I want them judged as mine—not as a woman's.'"

There are plenty of issues that still remain to be addressed before women's progress toward full equality can be called anything like complete, but they are almost all best construed as problems of individual rights and family needs. And the solutions of first-resort do not necessarily lie in the public sphere. Clearly abortion is a "public" issue—it needs a government imprimatur, and therefore a group response. There is no mystery about why this has been the only issue in recent years that has roused women to public protest. Still, it is time for a shift in the character of that response, from alienating rhetorical lobbying of the Supreme Court, which has been futile, to grass-roots organizing of women—and men—to sway legislatures, local and federal.

The issue of sex discrimination—in hiring, in promotions, in pay—is now best seen as a mostly private affair. There was a good reason, a quarter century ago, that discrimination was emphasized as a problem that affected women as a group. But now, with equal employment opportunity laws long on the books and women having at least broken into nearly every field, the continual focus on discrimination as such—as well as the singular emphasis on government-induced solutions—may be inhibiting true equality. The deleterious long-term effects of affirmative action on blacks have been well described. The same applies to women.

Moreover, the continual focus on lawsuits as the first and only recourse has not only eroded the self-confidence that was supposed to result from the recognition of group oppression, but it has also stymied women from acting on their own. The assumption is that taking the risk and confronting an employer with a grievance—as a man would do—will get you fired. It very well might (which could even constitute better grounds for a lawsuit). In any case, a confrontation allows you to act like a responsible adult—not abjectly, like a helpless member of an oppressed group, fully dependent on government for protection. Perhaps if feminists devoted more time to encouraging women to vent their anger directly at their bosses rather than at the omnivorous patriarchy, women would be

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more successful at it. A similar expectation and encouragement of individual self-assertion should certainly be the answer of first resort to the problems of harassment and date rape, to which there are never going to be smoothly delineated legal or procedural solutions.

Government cannot cleanse society of sexism; culture and time can. Meanwhile women are going to have to work harder to break down remaining stereotypes. Of course it's unfair. But the alternative—the collective whining and complaining—accomplishes little aside from perpetuating these stereotypes. The corporate world used to think women couldn't work like men; we've proved them wrong by working like men. Now one explanation of the "glass ceilings" that women confront is the belief that we can't think like men, that we're mere technicians as opposed to the idea people, the policy-makers. These barriers can only be broken on our own; promotions through affirmative action prove very little—to our employers, or to ourselves.

As for the issues that are best counted as "family" issues (child care, parental leave, flextime) there has been a surprising hesitancy on the part of organized feminism to put these at the top of the agenda. (Faludi, in the traditional feminist spirit, worries that such concerns dilute the necessary emphasis on women's rights.) In fact, that may be just as well, for precisely the point is to rally broad support behind these issues, which are not "women's issues," except in some reactionary vision that equates concern with the domestic sphere with womanhood. (The point is also, obviously, to get men just as involved with these concerns on a practical, daily basis.) There is a role for government to play on such issues as parental leave and tax policy, but the truth is that the more subtle flexibility that is increasingly required for families juggling professional and private lives will be a matter for men and women to negotiate with their employers.

This doesn't leave the women's movement as it currently stands with a whole lot to do. But that soon may not matter; the movement is beginning to implode. "Multicultural feminism" has spawned so many divisions and subsets—Native American feminists, gay feminists, Jewish feminists, biracial feminists—that the whole concept of "sisterhood" is fast dissolving. Feminists are racked more than ever these days with sectarian questions. Who should be leading the movement, whites fighting glass ceilings or blacks struggling with the problems of the inner

cities? How do you "prioritize" oppression? Resentment (from feeling overly oppressed) and guilt (from not being oppressed enough) have created an atmosphere in which only a Chicana Buddhist asexual would feel qualified to represent women.

These tensions of identity politics are actually bringing feminism much closer to a "third stage"—in which self transcendence comes on—than many in the movement would like to believe. For the same reason that young women today shun the label, feminists are beginning to allow their individuality to shine through, and they are starting to take umbrage at having anyone "speak" for them; they have begun to realize that women are just as different from each other as we are different from men. "Feminism means that ... [a woman] wants to push on to the finest, fullest,

freest expression of herself," said Rose Young, a novelist and charter member of Heterodoxy. "She wants to be an individual."

This kind of thinking was present at the outset of the second wave—as Steinem put it, "We made the revolutionary discovery that everyone didn't *have* to live the same way"—but too quickly it was overrun by collective, political necessity. By now it's clear, however, that you can't take the freedom out of pure feminism any more than you can take it out of pure liberalism. Women should feel as free to have five children and bake cookies all day as to re-create themselves through plastic surgery, wear bustiers, skin-tight miniskirts, and spiked heels, and read hard-core porn magazines. This might offend your morals or sensibilities, but the beauty of real feminism is that it's none of your business. •

A Clamor of Tongues

BY DONALD DAVIE

Provinces

by Czeslaw Milosz

translated by the author and Robert Hass

(Ecco Press, 72 pp., \$19.95)

Beginning with My Streets

by Czeslaw Milosz

translated by Madeline G. Levine

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 288 pp., \$30)

The Poet's Work: An Introduction to Czeslaw Milosz

by Leonard Nathan and Arthur Quinn

(Harvard University Press, 176 pp., \$29.95, \$9.95 paper)

In his latest gathering of essays, *Beginning with My Streets*—more a medley than a collection, with a deceptive air of being "thrown together"—Czeslaw Milosz includes an interview from 1988 in which he intimates, mildly enough, his dissatisfaction with the poetry of today, in many languages. His charge against contemporary poetry is that it has been impoverished from within by closing off too many doors in a search for "purity in lyricism." This accusation has been leveled before by Milosz, but never emphatically, because being emphatic is seldom his style. All the same, it is the clue to his

achievement; he is one modern poet who has no interest in being a lyrical poet, who thinks indeed that exertions to that end are morally and politically often dubious.

Rather than the lyrical "I," emoting out of its own subjectivity (as Robert Lowell did, or Sylvia Plath), Milosz favors, and in his own poems puts into play, not one voice but several: voices that cross over, contradict one another, dissolve just when we think we have learned to trust them. This can be seen in poems short enough to look like lyrics. For instance, "Should, Should Not":