

# THE BOOKCASE

## Phony War

BY CATHY YOUNG

**Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women**  
By Susan Faludi, New York: Crown, 542 pages, \$22.50

While watching the recent PBS rerun of "I, Claudius," I was struck by the extent to which our notions of history are shaped by the writings of inevitably biased contemporaries. If our civilization were to perish like the Roman Empire, and if Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* were one of the few books to survive from the late 20th century, our descendants would think of the 1980s and early '90s as a dark age for women, "one long, painful, and unremitting campaign to thwart women's progress." They might wonder how we ever survived.

Faludi, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* (which should not be taken as an indication of her politics), sees signs of the backlash everywhere. The news media, says she, "went on a rampage" to denigrate single women and working mothers; TV and film showed women as contented June Cleaver clones, neurotics, or grasping bitches; corporations and the Reagan administration conspired to deny women good jobs. "The backlash watchtowers flashed their warning signals without cease, and like high-security floodlights they served to blind women." This is scary stuff. Most insidiously of all, the creators of the backlash ascribed it to women's own alleged disillusionment with the fruits of liberation.

In fact, argues Faludi, the backlash came from male fears and anxieties about rising female independence: "While the effects of the women's movement may not have depressed women, they did seem to trouble many men." This is partly because many men still see the provider role

as the essence of masculinity and are threatened by female competition in the job market. Moreover, liberated women tend to shun the bonds of matrimony ("The more women are paid, the less they are eager to marry") and make their own decisions about childbearing, leaving men—the ones who really need marriage—feeling miserable and left out.

There is surely some truth to this, but Faludi weakens her case by refusing to grant any validity to the opposing view: that women's progress has come at some cost, that some women feel cheated by feminism and would welcome a return to traditional roles. I strongly disagree with them, but that doesn't make them figments of the media's imagination. They do exist. They write letters to editors and occasional columns, some of which Faludi mentions without pausing to examine what they say—mostly to cite their very publication as proof of the backlash. (She scoffs at those who accuse feminism of quasi-totalitarian tendencies, but one gets the sense that her brand of feminism, at least, tolerates no discussion of any possible downside to the breakdown of old gender roles.) Faludi invokes a host of polls to minimize female ambivalence about the women's movement; buried discreetly in the epilogue is the revelation that not only men but almost as many women still "identify the breadwinner role as the leading masculine trait."

She also refuses to admit that men who are not opposed to equal rights may have reasons to worry about certain aspects of the women's movement. As one man told Faludi, "Every move a man made could be misconstrued by feminists. I didn't see



Faludi conveniently ignores recent films with strong female protagonists.

why I had to walk on eggs." It does not occur to her that he might have a point. Indeed, her own tone, often reminiscent of the old "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle" line, could give men just cause for alarm. Though professing occasional sympathy for beleaguered males and support for harmony between the sexes, Faludi sounds almost gleeful when she describes the miseries of single or divorced men and reports that "the biological father increasingly [does not] have...much of a say at all" in a woman's reproductive decisions. She regards poll findings that most women approve of single motherhood by choice and that nearly 40 percent think "the man involved should not even be consulted" about an abortion as an unequivocal sign of progress. (Ethics aside, is that a wise attitude to take if we want men to be more involved in child rearing?)

At times, Faludi makes strong and thought-provoking arguments. She punches holes in many popular stereotypes, such as marriage-hungry women vs. uncommitted men, and offers a convincing challenge to sociologist Lenore Weitzman's much-trumpeted statistic that women's living standards plunge by 73 percent after divorce while those of men rise by 42 percent. (Two scholars who did a much more extensive study of the effects of divorce on income, and

whose methods Weitzman claimed to have used, found only a *temporary* 30-percent drop in women's incomes and a 10- to 15-percent improvement for men. Weitzman was strangely evasive when they asked to look at her data.) Faludi's pithy account of the media's handling of several major stories affecting women is a useful reminder of the need for healthy skepticism toward "trends" and "crises," based as they often are on shaky figures, celebrity anecdotes, or dubious logic—such as a return to homebody values deduced from higher sales of oatmeal breakfast cereals.

What is far less convincing is the contention that such media-made crises as the infertility epidemic or the "marriage crunch" for career women over 30 stemmed from something just short of a deliberate conspiracy to scare women back into dependency. The media rarely let the absence of reliable data stand in the way of a good crisis, whether the story is heterosexual AIDS, plastics in our trash, or the 3 million homeless.

As Faludi unmasks the iniquities of the fashion industry, advertising, radio psychologists, relationship seminars, and so forth, one gets a sense that she was determined to cram everything into her extensively annotated opus. When she notes that "an exhaustive study of women's occupational patterns in the '80s would be outside the scope of this book," one is relieved to know *something* is outside its scope. Yet *Backlash* may be most remarkable for what it omits. Faludi's discussion of the pay gap between the sexes does not include the factors of age, marital status, and children. She decries the barriers faced by women in blue-collar trades but never acknowledges that in the '80s, feminists shifted their emphasis from helping women get into traditionally male occupations to legislating comparable pay in traditionally female jobs. She chronicles setbacks to the advancement of women yet ignores such developments as the increasing acceptance of the "battered woman's syndrome" legal defense.

This selective treatment of facts becomes especially frustrating when Faludi advances her argument about creeping

antifeminism in the media, meticulously listing articles and TV reports that have questioned the wisdom of employment for mothers of small children or the joys of the single life. What about the numerous pieces of journalism about the new fatherhood, the benefits for girls of having working mothers, women in business and nontraditional jobs, the future of the women's movement, even female body-builders? (*Time's* fall 1990 special issue, "Women: The Road Ahead," did not bother to quote so much as one woman unhappy with the goals and results of feminism.) What about the ratio of feminist to antifeminist columns in any major newspaper or magazine?

Sometimes, the omissions become distortions—which is all the more ironic since Faludi constantly pounces on misuse of data by authors whose conclusions she dislikes. A 1984 *Newsweek* story is presented as an anti-day care diatribe that glorifies women who give up careers to raise their kids. In fact, it ends with the assertion that day care is now "a basic family need" and calls for quality day care; the sidebar about mothers at home emphasizes that the women have not abandoned their careers but put them on hold or merely cut back on work.

It's more of the same with TV and film. In making her case that post-1980 movies have been overwhelmingly retrograde (this was written before *Thelma and Louise*), Faludi misrepresents some films (*Working Girl*, *House of Games*) and conveniently forgets about others (*Compromising Positions*, in which a suburban mom triumphantly returns to work as a reporter over her stuffy husband's objections; *Legal Eagles*, where the smart, tough attorney played by Debra Winger ends up winning her case and Robert Redford; *Aliens* with its warlike yet maternal heroine, and so on). Listing all the inaccuracies in *Backlash* might take nearly as hefty a tome. Suffice it to say that anyone who can attribute right-to-life sympathies to the mainstream media must be spending a lot of time vacationing on Mars.

And that's a shame, because Faludi does have important things to say about

the recent threats to women's autonomy, particularly the assault on abortion rights. (Even here, she cannot resist her penchant for fitting facts into the procrustean bed of theory: Intent on seeing the anti-abortion movement exclusively as a frightened male reaction to "the speed with which women embrace sexual and reproductive freedom," she ignores not only polls in which men are slightly *more* likely than women to favor unrestricted abortion but also the research of pro-choice sociologist Kristin Luker showing that traditionalist women are the mainstay of the pro-life movement.)

Faludi also targets the addiction and "codependency" industry and the campaign to control the behavior of pregnant women, listing genuine horror stories of babies snatched by the state from mothers who took a few Valiums or failed to observe a proper diet during pregnancy. Her focus on the "backlash," however, prevents her from seeing these disturbing trends in the larger context of the therapeutic state and the social paternalism that threaten the liberties of all Americans, male and female.

To do Faludi justice, she is at her best when exercising her reportorial skills, whether interviewing spunky working-class women or male and female antifeminists of the right. Her profiles of the latter make for fascinating reading—particularly as evidence of the extent to which some feminist ideals have pervaded the unlikeliest segments of society. Michael Levin, the ideologue of male dominance, and his wife, Margarita, a successful philosopher and mathematician who ostensibly shares his antifeminist views, present a model "dual-career household [where] child care duties are routinely divided in half." The formidable champion of masculinity, last seen wearing an apron, cuts a rather pathetic figure. Even women of the religious New Right, such as Beverly LaHaye, have been "quietly incorporating [feminist] tenets of self-determination, equality and freedom of choice into their private behavior."

But is it really self-determination and freedom of choice that Faludi champions?

In the epilogue, she admits that the backlash did not succeed in putting women back in their place. She believes, however, that it has set them back, and laments, above all, the fact that women have been trying to achieve their private goals on their own: "To instruct each woman to struggle alone was to set each woman up, yet again, for defeat."

Faludi points out that when women did mobilize, as in the surge of pro-choice activism in 1989, they scored big victories. Yet perhaps the example is instructive. An attempt to ban abortion is a political act that warrants political action with a clear purpose. When it comes to career choices or child-care arrange-

ments, most women, I think, still regard these decisions as essentially private—and rightly so. Susan Faludi and Eleanor Smeal may wax rhapsodic about what would happen "if women all got together on the same day, on the same hour," agitating, of course, not just for equal opportunity or reproductive freedom but for "a real governmental investment in social services." Those of us who cherish true diversity, who believe that women have rights as individuals and not as a gender, can only say: Please, ladies, start the get-together without me.

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such as existed in several dozen U.S. cities in the late 1980s, many individuals from even the underclass can be drawn into the workforce, and at good wages.

No sane person, however, would prescribe the labor market conditions of, say, late-1980s Boston (which Osterman examines) as a healthy way to eliminate the underclass nationally. Labor shortages create serious problems in their own right. And even as antipoverty devices they aren't reliable: At the peak of the Boston labor crunch, 12 percent of all families in the city remained officially "in poverty."

This brings us to the behavioral issues. As Christopher Jencks shows, in 1968 only about a quarter of the people in poverty were "undeserving" (or lacking what he describes as "socially acceptable reasons for being poor"—for instance, old age, physical disability, or low wages in spite of steady work). Today, more than half of all poor people fall into that category. Simple idleness among young, able-bodied persons, he points out, has gone up dramatically since the mid-1960s.

Greg Duncan and Saul Hoffman present findings from their study comparing the economic fortunes of women who completed high school and avoided having a child as unwed teenagers to those of women who either dropped out or had a baby or did both. Not surprisingly (except to social scientists who never thought to measure this until Charles Murray brought it up), they learn that "teenagers who followed the rules" had much lower chances of subsequent poverty.

What's more, they find that the likelihood of a teenager becoming an unmarried welfare mother corresponds in a statistically significant way to the level of welfare benefits available to her—another Murray contention that has caused an outbreak of hives and indignation among members of the poverty-study industry.

Duncan and Hoffman conclude their contribution with this impassive sentence: "Our descriptive work on the consequences of teenage behavior shows... that schooling and delayed childbearing are sufficient conditions for most women, black and white, to avoid poverty as

## When You're a Ghetto Child

BY KARL ZINSMEISTER

**The Urban Underclass**, edited by Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson  
Washington: Brookings Institution, 450 pages, \$34.95

**There Are No Children Here**, by Alex Kotlowitz, New York: Doubleday, 324 pages, \$21.95



Does the neighborhood fail Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers or are they betrayed by the people closest to them?

The authors of *The Urban Underclass* start with a paradox: Despite big jumps in wages and income since the mid-1960s and a public mobilization that ratcheted welfare spending from 5 percent of GNP then to 10 percent now, the poor are still with us. In wrestling with this reality, the contributors' most interesting discussions center loosely around the question of whether it is primarily faults in the nation's economic structure

or faults in human character that account for the most enduring and damaging forms of modern poverty.

There is wide agreement that continued economic growth is important to reducing persistent poverty. (Unemployment, it is pointed out, falls about twice as fast among blacks as among whites during economic recoveries.) Richard Freeman and Paul Osterman both show that in unnaturally tight labor markets,