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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

"Backlash" and Its Utility to Political Scientists

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The global warming backlash, the managed care backlash, the Bush backlash, the corporate backlash, the 9/11 backlash, the Obama backlash, the Clinton backlash, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) bill backlash, the antigay backlash, the immigration backlash, the backlashes against globalization, student testing, the social, economic, and political progress of Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans, and, central to this "Critical Perspectives," the backlash against the feminist movement — these were just some of the many politically related backlashes that appeared when I performed a general Google search of the words: "backlash" and "politics" in July of 2008.

More generally, it seems that the term is used for everything political, social, economic, and cultural for which political disagreement exists — in other words, "backlash" is used nearly everywhere nearly all the time. Most relevant to our purposes, it is often used carelessly, without clear and consistent definitions or boundaries, and without critical engagement with what is arguably a centrally important concept for analyzing women's current political status and future opportunities. Because little scholarly work has focused in-depth attention on backlash, this collection of essays seeks to open a discussion of the concept by examining it from the perspectives of political theory, American politics, and comparative politics.

The overarching questions that guided these Critical Perspectives essays are the following:

- What is backlash? What are its components, both distinct and overlapping? How is it distinguished from related political and social concepts? Especially, how is it different from ordinary political opposition to specific policies or perspectives? How does backlash interact with varying and

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various understandings of feminism? How, if at all, does it differ from anti-feminism?
- What are the underlying social, political, economic, and cultural forces that propel it, and how do these differ across societies?
- What are examples of the manifestation of backlash in mass politics, in elite politics and in social movements in the United States and around the world?
- How can its impact be understood for groups of women as well as women as a group? That is, how does the concept differ in terms of multiple and overlapping identities (some mutable, some immutable) of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and age, to name a few?
- How does scholarly unpacking of backlash affect our ability to make visible the circumstances that women across the world face as they seek to improve their everyday lives?
- What does analysis of backlash add to theories, concept development, hypotheses, and research designs in political science?
- How does backlash vary over time, place, and system type in terms of manifestations, direction, trajectory, chronic versus acute patterns, and strength? Or put somewhat differently, under what conditions does backlash occur? Relatedly, how do we measure backlash both cross-sectionally and longitudinally?
- Who perpetrates backlash?
- How might backlash best be addressed and ameliorated in the United States and across the world?

To situate the essays of our three contributors, it is useful to explore the popular and scholarly use of the concept to date. As noted by Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames in their essay to follow, backlash in the United States and elsewhere has been an ideological concept used to depict the reaction of the political Right to changes proposed or actualized by the Left. For example, scholars of politics, history, and sociology have relied on it to analyze right-wing movements and the Civil Rights movement in the United States (see, for example, Lipset and Raab 1970 and Chen 2007),[1] and political scientists and sociologists have included the term in broad discussions of reactions to changes in women's status (see, for example, Bratton 2002, 2005; Hawkesworth 1999; Kathlene 1994; Yoder 1991).[2] However, Susan Faludi's 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* may be

1. In political science, Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab defined backlash politics as "the reaction by groups which are declining in a felt sense of importance, influence, and power" (Lipset and Raab 1970:3).

2. For application to political representation of lesbians and gays and Latinos, see Haider-Markel (2007) and Preuhs (2007).

said to have popularized the term. And, in the 16 years since the book's original publication, as the opening of this essay illustrates, its use has both accelerated and been applied to many other types of political, social, economic, and cultural struggles across the ideological spectrum.

Political science analysis of backlash against women's political progress has been rare, and, with some exceptions, what is available has generally not made backlash a central focus of investigation (but see, for example, Hawkesworth 1999). In contrast, popular analysis in the United States has been widespread and perhaps best represented by Faludi's work. In 1991, and in 2006 in a new introduction to her book, Faludi argued that a backlash against American women was rampant in popular culture, politics, psychology, and the media. In the 1980s, it took the form of an argument that women had won the rights they were seeking, but that the results had made them "miserable." The foundation of the 1980s backlash was a focus on what "equality" took away from women — "femininity" and all that goes with it, especially attractiveness, marriage, and fulfillment through full-time, year-round child rearing. Women, it was asserted, needed to turn away from feminism or risk further pervasive and deep dissatisfaction. The 1990s version, says Faludi, is even worse. She argues that conservatives have given up their efforts to convince women that they do not need education, jobs, or even descriptive political representation. Instead, purveyors of backlash are attempting to convince women that they should not try to overturn the "patriarchal status quo." That is, women need not work to change the system that keeps them in "a perpetual stalemate" in which they have access to increased levels of opportunity, but no real power to achieve the feminist vision of a society that creates spaces for women and men to share equitably in the public and private spheres.[3]

Although the work of Faludi and others who have popularly explored backlash in the United States[4] does not address the concept in all the dimensions enumerated here, and though it is particularly weak in demonstrating 1) how arguments are translated into individual, group, institutional, and societal outcomes, and 2) how backlash arguments often mask crucial differences among women, this work has kept the issue front and center in popular and much academic discourse.

3. For a discussion of backlash in the political science profession, see Sarkees and McGlen 1999.

4. In 2007, Caryl Rivers issued a similar treatise: *Selling Anxiety: How the News Media Scare Women*. In it, Rivers echoes the view that "40 years" of backlash is evident in exhortations to women to return to traditional roles or forfeit happiness and fulfillment. Like Faludi, she documents media backlash against women's social, political, and economic progress.

Accordingly, it can assist scholars in their pursuit of the kind of focused and comprehensive analyses encouraged by the contributors to this Critical Perspectives.

First, popular examinations of backlash offer identification and extensive cataloging of the narratives, tactics, and purveyors of aspects of backlash — beginning with ample evidence of the pervasive tailoring of cultural messages that insist that women are first in the home, second in the workplace, and valued mainly for their youth, attractiveness, and demonstrated femininity.[5] Authors like Faludi document the constant stream of words and images fashioned to revive an earlier era of male privilege in all its dimensions.

Popular discussions of backlash also unpack some of the ways that its purveyors ensure that examination of women's roles and status is internally directed, private, and framed to divide women — rather than outwardly directed toward the institutional, social, cultural, and economical culprits of disadvantage. These treatises provide concrete evidence of ubiquitous, divisive, and insidious debates in the United States and other nations about the "opt-out revolution," the "mommy wars," the impossibility of work–life balance, the boys' "crisis," "mommy guilt," and eternal cycles of advice on how to remain sexy, youthful, attractive, and feminine (or what Faludi refers to as the pursuit of "consumerism and self-perfection"). These messages are meant to cause women — and men — to question the costs of feminist advances, and are framed to threaten women's sense or aspirations of security and fulfillment. The solution: rejection of the central tenants of second-wave feminism (read: the pursuit of collective political agency) and the embrace of the new "postfeminist" era (read: the pursuit of individualism).

Cataloging of backlash narratives and tactics is often accompanied by the articulation of counternarratives that can assist scholars in analyses of the concept, the messages used by its purveyors, the real-world effects of backlash, and avenues for its amelioration. For example, considerable attention has been devoted to the costs of rejecting feminist politics and progress. Two types of arguments are dominant here. First, authors critical of backlash efforts point out that gains of the second wave of the women's movement in the United States and elsewhere are by no means irreversible. For example, the nearly 35-year battle to reverse reproductive rights (mainly directed toward abortion) has expanded significantly, and sometimes successfully, to include limits on contraception. Hence,

5. All of which require physical discomfort, limitation, and great expense.

losing hard-won rights is likely to leave women worse off than they had been before feminist advances. Second, as E. J. Graff of the Gender and Justice Project at Brandeis's Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism asserts, backlash narratives that cast the United States as a postfeminist society in which feminist goals have been accomplished are profoundly mistaken; an accurate analysis identifies our society as something more akin to "mid-feminist" (Graff 2007).

"Mid-feminism" is another way of saying that the feminist revolutionary glass is only half full, and backlash is one of the reasons. For example, backlash rhetoric limits feminist progress by encouraging confusion of entry-level opportunity with equitable structures, processes, and outcomes in both public and private spheres. In the United States and many Western cases, women have gotten closer to equal opportunity at the entry levels of education, sports, and jobs — although those gains appear to be little more shared across categories of women than has ever been the case. And, though many more of us can play sports in grade school and beyond, pursue education through the highest levels, and join a wider swath of the employment sector, the sticky floor and the glass ceiling are alive and well across all these domains (Williams 2001). Along with persistent, pervasive inequalities on the home front in which men do not perform equal shares of child, elder, and home care, and with inflexible workplaces that fail to either facilitate men's increased contribution or accommodate women's double duty, women's employment access, success, and retention is compromised (see Andronici and Katz 2007; Haas and Hwang 2007; Verkaik 2007; Wall and Arnold 2007).[6] Thus, the concept of "mid-feminism" acknowledges the costs of retreating from feminism and also the fact that many of the dissatisfactions emphasized by purveyors of backlash are products of incomplete feminist transformation, rather than "too much" feminism or a finished agenda.

To accomplish the kinds of research agenda outlined in the overarching questions above and in these Critical Perspectives essays, political scientists need to offer theoretically and conceptually grounded, methodologically rich, evidence-based analysis of its forms, perpetrators, effectiveness, consequences, and paths toward amelioration across

6. Andronici and Katz (2007) speak about the "maternal wall" or "unexamined assumptions about how women behave once they become mothers." This wall results in failure to be hired, lower wages, changing duties, denial of promotion, and job loss. More broadly, Cherie Booth Blair speaks of the "glass ceiling in the home" that affects child care, elder care, and home management and hinders women's employment advancement (Verkaik 2007).

societies. Indeed, I would argue that such scholarship is vital to improved societal deliberation about women's current status and future opportunities.

Among political science's many potential contributions to unpacking backlash could be improved investigations of structural and policy resistance to solutions to the gap between women's opportunity and outcomes. Starting with the U.S. workplace, political imposition or voluntary acceptance by businesses and governments of widespread use of flextime schedules for women and men, subsidized child and elder care, family leave (and the incentives for it to be used by both parents), and sustainable, part-time employment are much debated, but insufficiently institutionalized. As Joan Williams of the University of California Hastings College of the Law Center for WorkLife Law says, "[the United States has] the most family-hostile public policy in the Western world" (Graff 2007). Similarly, we could analyze the extent to which the design and application of many existing (and proposed) policies perpetuate gendered roles and divisions of labor. A recent example comes from Britain. According to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, an April 2007 maternity leave law extension made employers more resistant to hiring or promoting women. One solution being debated is a focus on parental, rather than maternity, leave — with encouragement to men to share the time off (BBC News 2008). As these two examples illuminate, as a profession we are well situated to analyze the various ways in which backlash tactics have contributed toward institutional and policy failure to promote full agency for women and men in the home and in employment — and the path to clearing these impediments.

Political scientists also have much to contribute to address the fact that although backlash rhetoric focuses heavily on dividing women against women ("mommies" who stay home from "mommies" who work is the ubiquitous Western example), it continually obscures disparities among women related to multiple and overlapping identities, including race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and immigration status. To introduce but a few examples from the United States, while debating the legitimacy and implications of the "opt-out" narrative, little of substance is said about women of all races and ethnicities and citizenship statuses who, regardless of personal preference, have no economic "choice" about engaging in paid employment and little opportunity for work situations that enable them to both care for families and earn income sufficient to shelter, feed, and cloth them. Speaking continually about women's need

to balance work responsibilities with duty to their husbands renders lesbians invisible. And media saturation of images and discussions that portray women's worth as tied directly — and perhaps principally — to being young, thin, fashionable, and classically beautiful (read: white) does little to empower women, especially women of color. To the extent that we make use of our skills and perspectives as political scientists to illuminate the lived experiences among women, backlash narratives can be rendered less potent.

In the essays that follow, that is precisely what our authors do. First, Mansbridge and Shames ground our collection of essays theoretically by positing a definition of backlash that is nonideological, relies on coercive power in the form of threats or sanctions (including overt force, divide-and-conquer strategies, and the soft repression of ridicule, stigma, and silencing), and seeks to reinstate a former status quo. In this definition, backlash is distinguishable from mere persuasion — although Mansbridge and Shames are careful to note that defining persuasion precisely is crucial as it can include "coercive persuasion that is really a form of power." Using abundant examples, they make clear that backlash situations may differ substantially in terms of state action, action by groups of nonstate actors, and individual action against other individuals (such as incidents of interpersonal violence). In the end, their goal to "make the phenomenon more amenable to the investigations of social science" has been well met.

The remaining two essays address selected topics in U.S. and comparative research. Kira Sanbonmatsu explores the potential for backlash against women's descriptive representation in the United States. She begins by elaborating the forms this may take and quickly hones in on a crucial insight: that backlash may be directed against individual women or women politicians as a group or groups. Backlash against individuals may be manifested in multiple ways, including against women perceived to have violated gender norms — or women perceived as displaying overly feminine (and thereby unpolitician-like) traits. Or women officeholders may be judged as pursuing too strong a feminist agenda. Reactions against women as a group or groups may include negative evaluations of policy positions, as well as changes in the climate "toward women in general or the women's movement." Sanbonmatsu is also careful to differentiate triggers of backlash to women's increased representation, including changes in numbers, changes in the rate of improvement in representation, and changes in types of offices achieved. The last section of the essay concentrates on potential hypotheses and

methods to test them. Scholars wishing to investigate this rich subject matter are provided with a blueprint for future research agendas.

Sita Ranchod-Nilsson explores backlash from the perspective of gender relations in postindependence sub-Saharan Africa. Using the case of Zimbabwe, she relates how the limited ideological commitment to gender equality of liberation struggle leaders resulted in fairly rapid reversal of early legal protections for women. Additionally, as economic crises and authoritarian rule took hold, women became targets for retributive violence against those who challenged Robert Mugabe's ruling party. Ranchod-Nilsson argues that the pattern of advances and retrenchments of women's status and treatment in Zimbabwe after independence should alert scholars to several backlash concerns. The first is the need to be sensitive to the dynamic nature of backlash, how quickly it can be activated, and its particular manifestations in situations of state consolidation. Second, scholars exploring backlash in postindependence societies need to make clear and distinct its linkages to global processes pertaining to production, development aid, and transnational social movements. Finally, she argues that an understanding of backlash as an attempt to restore a status quo may need modification where the status quo was interrupted by decades of a colonial rule. In all, she well addresses the ways in which the concept has to be interrogated for application across political cultures, historical circumstances, and social formations.

In this contribution to the *Politics & Gender* Critical Perspectives series, we have scratched the analytical surface of the concept of backlash. Our hope is to spur further scholarly conversation about how best political science can use its distinctive tools and perspectives to improve the public debate on the topic. Let the dialog begin.

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Toward a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of Power

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To understand backlash theoretically, we must first carve out an analytically useful term from the cluster of its common political associations. In colloquial usage, "backlash" denotes politically conservative reactions to