

Hi Brittany,

I read the chapter (ch. 3) you gave me from Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, here are my thoughts. Levy is generally in the tradition of Gloria Steinem and (loosely) the early Betty Friedan (of *The Feminine Mystique*). I would love to begin by “accepting” or “rejecting” Levy’s position. Unfortunately, this case is a bit gray. Overall, I lean against Steinem and Levy in favor of Camille Paglia and Nevins (the producer Levy critiques in the article) and the later Friedan (of *The Second Stage*, where the confrontational approach to cultural formations yields to a more collaborative approach). However, I’m definitely sympathetic to some of Levy’s positions (although I find her habit of “proving” things by the anecdotal evidence of three 20-somethings she met in lower Manhattan a bit irritating).

Here are some annotations, some of them personal and off-the-wall, some of them deliberately trying to inject a thoughtful male perspective, some more trying situate Levy historically...

p. 90 Nevins grew up “where women were quiet.” I’ve often heard of this place but never been there. Certainly not in the home I grew up in or the bars I worked at or the universities I taught at.

p. 91 Nevins pounds the old fogie lady for her “fifties talk.” Levy here “makes her move” and very deliberately situates herself historically – on the surface, she sides (theoretically at least) with the old lady against Nevins, but on a deeper level she is clearly siding with Gloria Steinem against Camille Paglia. One could see Steinem/Levy and Paglia/Nevins as two threads that came out of 60s feminism.

Steinem/Levy argue that reducing women to sex objects devalues them (and that Paglia/Nevins glorify the quasi-pornographic images that hold women down). Paglia/Nevins argue that giving women a carte blanche to express their sexuality however they like is liberating (and that Steinem/Levy are a bunch of prudes who recoil at the first hint of sexual desire).

I think Levy has raised an interesting debate question here – when it comes to an overly sexualized pop culture, and pop culture’s demand that women be overly sexualized, how can you point out the exploitative/devaluing side of it without coming off as “puritanical,” as one who thinks that any hint of raw sexual desire is evil? Or how can you celebrate sexuality and the sexual body without opening yourself up to exploitative, devaluing consequences, without endorsing a view of women as just something to be “fucked by men”?

But by bottom paragraph p. 92, Levy gets a little too snarky with her self-congratulatory sarcasm, and I believe she opens herself up to Paglia’s perennial charge that Steinemesque feminists become a little hysterical in the face of anything sexual. Levy started with a good question, but she is so smug in her own conviction that I lose faith in her ability to search objectively through the complicated layers of this topic.

I would come at the apparent contradiction (where each thread has a strength and a weakness, but never the twain shall meet) by a return to the 60s hippie culture that was formative for both threads. For that moment in cultural history, I believe both threads made sense together as one

fabric. There was a sense in the counterculture that sexuality should be celebrated openly, almost defiantly, in the face of Establishment conventionality, as one way of breaking down those conventions and the capitalist, consumer culture supported by such conventions. This means returning sex to its fully human value, not reducing it to a commodity value (which is what happens to all values under capitalism). From this point of view, open sexuality between loving human beings is great. On the other hand, the over-sexualized, quasi-pornographic media pulls sexuality back into the vulgar, materialist, capitalist, consumer culture by commodifying sex and the human body. For me the litmus test is whether the open sexuality being expressed reinforces the human value of human beings (good) or the commodity value of human beings (bad).

So for me, Paglia/Nevins is right that we should be free to express our sexuality as we choose; she is right that the sexual desire of men for women, which some feminists seem to think is intrinsically negative, is actually a powerful, positive, archetypal part of the human experience that we should welcome and celebrate. But Paglia in my mind goes too far into celebrating pornography, failing to acknowledge any difference between liberating forms of sexual openness and dehumanizing forms that use sexuality to pull us back into a more intensely “commodified” version of what should be human values.

Steinem and Levy have the opposite strength and weakness. They rightly see that commodified versions of sexuality, and of the female body in particular, don't really help women at all in their personal lives or in their collective struggle to be seen as equal to men (although they may give a momentary feeling of freedom). But Steinem and Levy may go too far in that they do seem to recoil at any hint of sexual desire, as if that to express such desire were itself a crime against women. They have actually fallen into the same trap as Paglia. Whereas Paglia failed to distinguish between liberating and destructive forms of sexual openness, and marked all sexual openness as “good,” Steinem/Levy similarly fail to distinguish between liberating and destructive forms of sexual openness, and mark all sexual display as “bad.” Opposite problems resulting from the same mistake. The solution must be to start with a recognition that sexual openness can be deployed in both liberating and destructive ways (based on whether it reinforces the fully human aspect of human relations or reduces human relations to visual fragments and commodity-values). Probably the 60s/hippie bra-burnings come closest to a ritual that finds the sweet spot. The bra burnings said, “We’re going openly celebrate our natural sexuality, AND we will not let our sexuality be reduced to the pornographic trappings of a bourgeois consumer culture.” So (as usual for me), the economy of values in the hippie movement is the one that has the right balance and the lasting value.

... now to continue my annotations...

p. 94 I agree that women have often had to become “one of the guys” to move up and that this is a problem. I probably don't see it as quite so severe as Levy. Most of these production houses she speaks of want money above all else – they really don't care if you're a male, female, or hermaphrodite; if they see dollar signs they'll take it. Does this mean someone who's “confident, aggressive, and unconflicted about [their] choices”? Yes, probably so. But if these are the traits that generate dollar signs, women can “be” that as well as men. Believe it or not most “guys” need to learn how to be “one of the guys” to move up, too. If a guy is not “confident, aggressive, and unconflicted about his choices,” he won't advance at these kinds of institutions.

p. 96ff. I pretty much agree with Levy's assessment of the trio of twenty-somethings in New York. I agree with Levy that there are good reasons "one might not want to feel like a stripper" (98). But whereas Levy seems to think this trio represents all women, I am not willing to concede this level of philosophical immaturity to women in general.

I share Levy's distaste for Howard Stern, *The Man Show*, etc., but waddaya gonna do? Juvenile sexual humor will always be with us. All we can do is call it juvenile and move on.

There is some stereotyping of men that is unfortunate in Levy (and easy to fall into if you're writing a feminist essay). From my experience, the number of men who find the "stripper" a model of female attractiveness are a small minority (though amply represented in pop culture). The number of men who are "confident, aggressive, and unconflicted in their choices" also a minority, although it's a sliding scale. In other words, I'm not even sure how a woman could try to "act like a man" unless she first reduces all men to a simplistic single stereotype that can be emulated.

pp. 104-107. I think Levy misses the whole point of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (a common problem among "scholars" who accept conventional wisdom about the book ... but in this case it adversely affects her gender theory). If you don't cherry pick the cliché passages, Tom is clearly constructed as a man of strong and unwavering ideals and willing to heroically suffer abuse for those ideals. The whole point of the novel is that human goodness *does* transcend race (or gender). Levy seems to argue that if you try to transcend race, you can only end up "acting white"; if you try to transcend gender, you can only end up "acting male." To me this is a very self-defeating, binary view of the world. I disagree with Levy here and agree with Harriet Beecher Stowe that we can and should emulate great people regardless of their race or gender, that there is a shared humanness underneath the trappings of race and gender (and therefore we CAN transcend race and gender).

On p. 108, Levy seems to come around to my point of view about male stereotypes and the human level that transcends race or gender ... but other parts of her essay reinforce those very stereotypes and undermine that capability to transcend.

p. 117. She ends by saying "If you are the exception that proves the rule, and the rule is that women are inferior, you haven't made any progress." I say, "Yes, but exceptions – like you or our recent female engineer Melanie at Penta – don't "prove the rule"; they gradually undermine the rule, making it a little bit easier for those who follow.