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Book Review - "Pigs and Raunch: 21st-Century Feminism?"

Amanda J. Swygart-Hobaugh M.L.S., Ph.D.
Georgia State University, aswygarthobaugh@gsu.edu

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"Pigs" and "Raunch"—21st-Century Feminism?

Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture, ARIEL LEVY. New York: Free Press, 2005. 224 pp., ISBN: 0743249895 $25.00 cloth, 256pp., ISBN: 0743284283 $14.00 paper.

Some might be skeptical of the intellectual merits of a journalist's book entitled "Female Chauvinist Pigs" sporting the iconic busty-woman silhouette of the stereotypical semi-trucker's mud flap on its hot-pink jacket. However, while her musings are not particularly ground-breaking by academic standards and sometimes fall short due to their journalistic treatment, Levy's treatise is an accessible text for introducing undergraduates to feminism and its supposed influence, misinterpretation, and failings in contemporary American culture as well as scholarship surrounding the social construction of gender/sexuality.

Concerned about her perceptions of American women increasingly embracing a "Female Chauvinist Pig (FCP)" mentality (i.e., valuing themselves and other women primarily as sex objects), Levy embarked on an exploration of how this phenomena is being expressed by individual women and in broader popular culture. She criticizes such things as the exhibitionist *Girls Gone Wild* videos, women's emulation of sex workers as the ultimate liberated woman, the "cardio striptease" rage, and the über-success of the series *Sex in the City* as epitomizing the "rise of raunch culture" in American society. Also, via her interviews with women ranging from teens to Baby Boomers, she explores women's active engagement in reproducing this culture and mentality.

Levy opens with a sweeping overview of second-wave feminism. She discusses the "two distinct and passionately oppositional factions" of the "pornography wars" (p. 62, 63), dutifully citing Brownmiller, MacKinnon, and Dworkin as the forerunners on the "anti-" side. Her discussion of the "pro-" side and mention of those she believes exemplifies this stance—ex-porn star Candida Royalle and *Playboy* magnate Hugh Hefner—is comparatively disappointing; I would suggest supplementing additional texts that more thoroughly elucidate this perspective (e.g., Rubin, 1993). After exploring these tensions within and without of the women's movement, she then addresses how the "residue of that confusion" has manifested today as an "incoherent brand of raunch feminism" (p. 74) where "instead of hairy legs, we have waxed vaginas; the free-flying natural woman boobs of yore have been hoisted with push-up bras" (p. 87). Admittedly, Levy falls into the familiar traps when abridging feminism: oversimplification and/or dichotomization of perspectives; neglecting discussion of the diverse feminisms (e.g., lesbian, women of color, third-wave, etc.) and apparently equating third-wave feminism with "raunch feminism"; invoking stereotypes of feminism, etc. However, if supplemented by other texts and discussions of the merits/pitfalls of her presentation, this overview provides a starting point for undergraduates to explore her basic premise.

Levy then addresses this phenomenon of the FCP—who is "post-feminist," and "doesn't mind cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality, and she doesn't mind a cartoonishly macho response to them," views women's stripping and posing for *Playboy* as empowering, not degrading or objectifying, and thus asks herself, "Why try to beat them when you can join them?" (p. 93). Levy offers an interesting analogy of the FCP to "Tomming" (referring to Stowe's literary creation, Uncle Tom) as "conforming to…someone more powerful's…distorted notion of what you represent. In so doing, you may be getting ahead in some way…but you are

simultaneously reifying the system that traps you" (p. 106). She nicely segues this analogy into a brief discussion of what constitutes "masculine" and "feminine" behavior/attitudes in American culture. As well, throughout the book she argues how this FCP mentality limits women's sexuality to a commercialized, male-defined, emotionally-detached, "cartoonish" stereotype that hinders women from exploring the realization of a female-defined sexuality and thus alienates them from sexual pleasure and fulfillment—again, providing fodder for deeper discussions of the social construction of gender/sexuality that could be nicely supplemented by additional texts (e.g., Lorber & Farrell, 1991; Butler, 1999).

Departing from her primary focus on heterosexual women's embracing of their inner FCP, Levy's chapter devoted to the "bois" subculture illustrates how, in her interpretation, the FCP mentality has infiltrated the lesbian community. Via her interviews and observations, Levy touches on the politics of gender performance, butch/femme, and transgendered/transsexual identity in the lesbian community. Again, while her analyses are limited and arguably flawed as presented, her observations offer springboards for deeper discussions supplemented by additional texts (e.g., Butler, 1999).

In conclusion, Levy's book, while written for the general public in a journalistic style, is well suited as a text for undergraduate women's studies, sociology of gender, and psychology of women/gender courses. Students will be engaged by the familiar popular culture examples Levy uses to illustrate her premise, and her discussions of the social construction of gender/sexuality provide entrée for these novices to venture into deeper explorations via supplementary texts. While Levy's argument may be "old hat" to the seasoned feminist, it undoubtedly will incite many a undergraduate to reflect on this critique of and his/her role in reproducing and/or combating the phenomenon of "female chauvinist pigs" and the "rise of raunch culture."

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