

Excerpts from “**Toward a Theory of Backlash: Dynamic Resistance and the Central Role of Power,**” *Politics & Gender*, 4 (2008), by Jane Mansbridge & Shauna L. Shames

© The Women and Politics Research Section of the American Political Science Association.

To understand backlash theoretically, we must first carve out an analytically useful term from the cluster of its common political associations...We begin where the process of backlash itself begins, with *power* and a challenge to the status quo.

We define “power” in general as preferences and interests causing (or raising the probability of) outcomes.¹ We call this broad understanding *power as capacity*... When we do not specify that we are speaking of power as capacity, “power” will mean *coercive power*. In situations of coercive power, the parties have conflicting interests. Coercive power has two forms: the threat of sanction and the use of force (“force” includes all actions that make others do what they would not otherwise do without involving their will). The difference between force and threat is the difference between a rape that occurs because the rapist slipped a knockout drug into his victim’s drink (force) and sex between a wife and an abusive husband who swears he will beat her for resisting (threat).

Our idea of power, as both capacity and coercion, involves not only preferences but also interests causing outcomes. If an individual has interests — states of the world that are better for him or her than other states — that individual does not have to make those interests conscious in the form of preferences for the interests to cause outcomes. The long-term interests of the more powerful can create situations in which others act to produce outcomes that further those interests because the others think that they may be rewarded for those actions... A housewife in the 1950s, for example, may have kept the children quiet and away from their father while he read the newspaper, without her ever having asked or his having had to consider whether or not he preferred the power dynamic that placed his desires first in the household...

Many, if not most, forms of force are not violent. Force can include any social structure or set of structures that leads people to act unknowingly to their own disadvantage. Unquestioned social norms that work in the interests of some and the disadvantage of others serve as forms of force. Thus, gendered language is an example of force, in this case caused more by the underlying interests of men than by their active preferences. The status quo, meaning the existing power arrangements of a particular time and place, always endows certain individuals with greater capacity than others to enact their preferences or realize their interests. The process of preference enactment or interest realization can be conscious or unconscious. Thus, under a certain set of power arrangements, the interests of powerful individuals cause outcomes that advantage them even without involving their intent.

When a group of actors disadvantaged by the status quo works to enact change, that group necessarily challenges an entrenched power structure. The resistance of those in power to attempts to change the status quo is a “backlash,” a reaction by a group declining in a felt sense of power (Lipset and Raab 1978) of the broad sort, that is, power as capacity. Backlash to regain the lost or threatened power as capacity comes in several forms. It may involve subtle forms of coercive power (such as ridicule,² condemnation, ostracism, censure) or far less subtle forms (such as assassination, rape, beatings, lynchings, or other forms of violence) directed against key change agents or change leaders. In both cases, *backlash is the use of coercive power to regain lost power as capacity*. Because backlash is a reaction to shifts in power as capacity, and because it often changes over time in response to changing conditions and relations, we conceive of backlash as a process of *dynamic resistance*.

If, for example, I were a man before the second wave of the U.S. feminist movement, I had certain capacities to have my preferences and interests cause outcomes (time to read the newspaper undisturbed,

for instance, among many other positive outcomes for me). After the second wave, my preferences and interests could not cause as many outcomes... I might use the threat and practice of ridicule and every other socially acceptable sanction, and even, in the case of batterers and other men who commit violence against women, some sanctions that are not socially acceptable. All are forms of coercive power... The recent movie *North Country* depicts fictionally how working-class male coal miners in Minnesota, made uncomfortable and occasionally jobless by the movement of women into mining jobs, pursued a backlash strategy of vicious sexual harassment that forced most of the women out of the mining jobs.

Three components are necessary for backlash. First, the action must be a reaction. A backlash lashes *back* at something another has done. Second, the reaction must involve coercive power. Third, the reaction must involve trying to reinstate part or all of one's former power in the most general meaning of capacity to turn preferences or interests into outcomes. On average, all individuals will want to increase their capacity to produce outcomes, their power as capacity. But individuals will want to *reinstate* their former power as capacity with an even greater intensity because 1) losses are experienced more painfully than gains (Bentham [1789] 1961; Kahneman and Tversky 1979); 2) the loss of capacities is usually even more emotionally powerful than simple material loss; and 3) becoming accustomed to a capacity makes that capacity feel like a natural part of the self... So many pre-second-wave men became accustomed to having the final say in household matters because "father knows best," or today members of the middle class in rich nations get used to a certain level of income and begin to think of, say, restaurant dinners, taxi rides, and vacation trips as "necessities."...

For many experiencing such loss and rage, an immediate reaction may be an attempt to regain the lost power as capacity, through the use of coercive power if necessary. When a loss (usually with outrage over the loss) leads individuals or groups to use coercive power to regain a level of former power as capacity, this is a backlash...

Backlash politics is "the politics of despair," according to Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, who stress "the continual efforts of the old 'in-groups,' particularly of white Protestant background, to protect their values and status," as a source of what we now call "counter-movements" (1978, xvii).³ Such movements, they explain, arise in reaction against the "displacement of power and status accompanying change" (p. 3). Such displacement, however, is a necessary part of the process of change. As the legendary organizer Saul Alinsky put it, "Change means movement. Movement means friction. Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict" (Alinsky 1972, 21).

Not every movement must engender a large and effective backlash, however; different movements for change in this country seem to have provoked different types of backlash. A strong backlash is often produced (or greatly exacerbated) by a dynamic in which the proponents of change 1) want to go further and faster than the general public can go, and 2) are insensitive to the deepest concerns of the opponents/general public (Mansbridge 1986). Social movements often succeed by changing the sense of justice even of those who would otherwise benefit from the unjust arrangements (e.g., whites, men). But it is a delicate walk. The powerful who need to change harbor reservoirs of ready-to-release outrage at their naturalized privilege being undermined. If that (illegitimate) outrage can be triggered by a more legitimate (in their eyes) outrage, the two combine into an outraged sense of injustice that can outweigh any sense of injustice that the change agents are trying to inculcate.

So "going too far, too fast" causes the worst backlash. *Brown v. Board* and *Roe v. Wade* were widely perceived as going "too fast" because they were Supreme Court decisions, not change that came about through legislative action or state by state. They were simultaneously perceived as not fully legitimate (because they were not the result of majority rule) and imposed on the whole country at once, including the most resistant places, before activists had been able to make headway in changing the dominant norms of

justice within those places. As the southern strategy of “massive resistance” to *Brown* for at least a decade after the decision and the widespread controversy over abortion rights today demonstrate, these changes got ahead of public ideas about justice, and they suffered from powerful backlash in return. [FN omitted]

Backlash against social movements can take many forms, including overt force (violence or threats), intentional strategies such as “divide and conquer” (trying to split up the coalition behind the movement), and the “soft repression” of “ridicule, stigma, and silencing” (Ferree 2004). The different forms flow from the nature of relations between the dominant and subordinate groups, and they undoubtedly have independent effects on how the backlash affects the course of the movement that challenges the status quo. The civil rights movement saw many direct and violent forms of the exercise of coercive power. But the very directness of some of these forms made the issues visible. As Martin Luther King well knew, the image of Bull Connor’s police force using fire hoses and dogs against civil rights marchers in Birmingham was a major turning point in enlisting the sympathy of northern liberals for the civil rights fighters. Indeed, guessing that there would be strong repression, King seems to have chosen Birmingham, Bull Connor’s jurisdiction, deliberately to provoke such a reaction.

The feminist movement saw few, if any, of such visible instances of the violent use of state power directly against the movement. On the other hand, intimate relations between men and women, combined with mutual love and mutual desires to live in concord, made withdrawal of approval and affection a potent weapon in the hands of men (as well as a potential sanction in the hands of women desiring change)... Women young and old have hesitated to identify themselves as “feminists” because, both at its introduction into the United States in the early twentieth century and in the second wave of the early 1970s, the word came to connote not only extremism, as many “isms” will do, but also man-hating. The association of feminism with unattractiveness or lesbianism has been, and continues to be, a powerful deterrent to women calling themselves feminists (Houvouras and Carter 2008; Huddy, Neely, and Lafay 2000)... The social movements for black and women’s civil rights thus faced different kinds of backlash, with state repression most prominent in the former and ridicule/soft repression prominent in the latter...

The backlash to any movement usually affects the movement at which it is directed. Scholars are only recently beginning to investigate the dynamics of backlash and response. In some ways, a movement can use backlash to promote its goals, as when King used the visible, loud, and violent enemies of civil rights to bring attention to the injustice they espoused. At other times, movements or movement entrepreneurs retreat or change their strategies to be less threatening in response to, or even in anticipation of, backlash. Some woman suffrage leaders of the early twentieth century responded to the antisuffragist charge that “suffrage would erase the differences between women and men” by emphasizing women’s difference and “superior moral natures.” Giving women the new label of “municipal housekeepers,” their speeches and pamphlets called for women to “clean the public house” (Kraditor 1965; Shames 2001). Instead of erasing the distinction between “women’s” and “men’s” work and “spheres,” they made women’s private work public...

We view this broad theoretical framework as applicable to a wide variety of backlash situations. Backlash in this sense could involve one group reacting to another group’s attempts at change, as when white voters in states bordering Mexico passed referenda denying health care and education to undocumented immigrants (e.g., in California’s Proposition 187 in 1994). It could apply to a case of state action (as with Bull Connor with his police force). Or it could describe nonstate actors, as in vigilante campaigns against members of a group that the vigilantes perceive as threatening their group’s power (e.g., in medieval pogroms against Jews in Europe or the Ku Klux Klan reign of terror against blacks in the South). Backlash can also describe a reaction by an individual against another individual, if the coercive individual is motivated by a larger threat to that individual’s power as capacity, as is the case of domestic violence. Scholars of domestic violence sometimes call the phenomenon “gender role enforcement” (see, e.g., Rosenfeld forthcoming), viewing such violence as a reassertion of male dominance over women acted

out through an individual man's asserting violent power over an individual woman. Reading such violence as simply an individual phenomenon ignores its deep connection to group power relationships.

This brief outline introduces some elements of a general theory of backlash. The relatively neutral definition that we propose partially removes the liberal imprint from the term "backlash," creating a usage that differs somewhat from the colloquial usage. Yet there are clear connections between this neutral definition and the politicized understanding because the Left in general initiates more change from the status quo than does the Right (although recently, the "radical Right" and libertarian Right have had much in common with the Left in this respect). We also depart from the colloquial usage in suggesting that it would help political analysts to distinguish coercive power from persuasion in situations of common interest and use the term "backlash" only for the use of coercive power. But whether or not an innovation is analytically helpful is a matter of practice, not theory...

REFERENCES

- Alinsky, Saul. 1972. *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. New York: Vintage.
- Bachrach, Peter, and Morton Baratz. 1963. "Decisions and Non-Decisions: An Analytical Framework." *American Political Science Review* 57(3w): 632-42.
- Bentham, Jeremy. [1789] 1961. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Dolphin.
- Faludi, Susan. 1991. *Backlash: The Invisible War Against America's Women*. New York: Crown.
- Ferree, Myra Marx. 2004. "Soft Repression: Ridicule, Stigma, and Silencing in Gender-Based Movements." In *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, ed. Daniel J. Myers and Daniel M. Cress. San Diego: Elsevier, vol. 25, 85-101.
- Houvouras, Shannon, and J. Scott Carter. 2008. "The F-Word: College Students' Definitions of a Feminist." *Sociological Forum* 23(2): 234-56.
- Huddy, Leonie, Francis K. Neely, and Marilyn R. Lafay. 2000. "Trends: Support for the Women's Movement." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64(3): 309-50.
- Kahneman, Daniel, and Amos Tversky. 1979. "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk." *Econometrica* 47(2): 263-91.
- Knight, Jack, and James Johnson. 1997. "What Sort of Equality Does Deliberative Democracy Require?" In *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 279-320.
- Kraditor, Aileen. 1965. *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1963. *The First New Nation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Earl Raab. 1978. *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lukes, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillian.
- Mansbridge, Jane. 1986. *Why We Lost the ERA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nagel, Jack H. 1975. *The Descriptive Analysis of Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Rosenfeld, Diane. Forthcoming. "Sexual Coercion, Patriarchal Violence and Law." In *Evolutionary Perspectives on Sexual Coercion*, ed. Richard Wrangham and Martin Muller. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shames, Shauna. 2001. "The Un-Candidates: Gender and Outsider Signals in Women's Political Advertising, 1968-1998." Unpublished senior thesis. Harvard College.
- Siegel, Reva B. 2006. "Constitutional Culture, Social Movement Conflict and Constitutional Change: The Case of the de facto ERA." *California Law Review* 94(5): 1323-1419.

-
1. Specifically, we define power in general as "the actual or potential causal relation between the preferences *or interests* of an actor *or set of actors* and the outcome itself," a definition adapted, by adding the words in italics, from Nagel's 1975 definition, which includes anticipated reactions and does not require intent. The categories of the threat of sanction and use of force derive from Bachrach and Baratz 1963. We take from Lukes 1974 a definition of coercive power that applies only in situations of conflicting interests.
 2. If you think something is ridiculous and tell me so, that can be a form of persuasion, not coercive power. In such a case, if I take your opinion seriously, I should weigh seriously your conclusion that a given action or stance deserves ridicule, that is, a shaming and belittling disapprobation. But if your conclusion that my action deserves ridicule comes unconsciously only from a desire to protect your power as capacity, then it does not deserve to be taken seriously. And, whether or not you intend it, if your ridicule serves as a sanction (makes me feel ridiculous in myself or deprives me of others' approval), then it is an exercise of coercive power. In such an example, persuasion and power cannot in practice easily be disentangled.
 3. "In almost every generation, 'old American' groups which saw themselves 'displaced,' relatively demoted in status or power by processes rooted in social change, have sought to reverse these processes through the activities of moralistic movements or political action groups" (Lipset and Raab 1978, xvii, quoting in part from Lipset 1963).