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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

progressive (or liberal) social or political change (Faludi 1991 is a classic in this vein). Here, however, we attempt a nonideological definition of backlash embedded in a more neutral approach to its study. In colloquial usage, backlash includes acts of genuine persuasion as well as of power. Here, however, we suggest that it may be analytically helpful to confine its meaning to acts of coercive power. We draw on the sociological literature on social movements and countermovements, as well as the political science literature on power, preferences, and interests. We focus mostly on examples drawn from the United States and relating to feminism and gender. 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*. Such power can be coercive or noncoercive. The distinction is crucial because while democratic norms mandate equality in coercive power, they do not necessarily mandate equality in all forms of power as capacity, for example, in the capacity to persuade others on the merits of an argument or proposed course of action when the persuader and persuaded do not have conflicting interests (Knight and Johnson 1997). The criterion for persuasion of no conflicting interests is crucial; it excludes manipulation and the kind of coercive "persuasion" that is really a form of power (Lukes 1974, 32, Fig. 1). 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 — arrangements of the world that are better for him or her

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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 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 when interests conflict. Some theorists call *power as capacity* "power-to" and *coercive power* "power-over".

than others — 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. In other words, others can anticipate the powerful individual's preferences without the individual actually having to have those preferences. 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.

When a more powerful group has an underlying interest, various social, economic, and political systems can evolve to meet those interests. The individuals in that group may never have to face the question of what their preferences would be if their interests were thwarted. More deeply, they may never have to face the question of what their pleasure and the realization of their interests costs others. Such ignorance can be a blissful by-product of a high level of both power as capacity and coercive power.

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 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 such outcomes. If my sense of justice did not intervene, it would be natural to try to keep as much as I could of my power as capacity, my ability to have my preferences and interests cause 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. Much sexual harassment of working women, for instance, results not only from sexual attraction caused by propinquity and facilitated by power imbalance, but also from the harrasser's corsions or uncorsions resistance to the increasing number or power of women in a workplace or the labor force more generally. Men who make sexually explicit comments and criticisms of the women with whom they work often succeed in regaining some male privilege in the workplace — whether or not this was their conscious intention. The 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.

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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 as an argument. 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 be disentangled easily (see below).

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. When one knows what a capacity feels like, knows one can have it, and accustoms oneself to it, one begins to naturalize its existence and comes to think of it as a right. Thus 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." In such circumstances, a loss of these capacities causes outrage along with mere pain.

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. So, for example, in 2007, middle-class white men accustomed to listening to sexist radio shock jockeys mobilized successful protests against the networks that tried to censor several commentators for misogynist and violent comments. These protests involved various forms of threat, including mass-organized street protests in front of the satellite radio offices in New York, the sending of menacing personal messages to network employees, and the distribution to news outlets of video messages depicting the men using guns, sledgehammers, and other violent means to destroy their XM radios. In this case, the backlash was mostly successful; hundreds if not thousands of subscribers canceled, causing many advertisers to withdraw support as well. And although the radio shock jocks were briefly suspended, they returned to the airwaves after 30 days.

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" often 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

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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).

abortion rights today demonstrate, these changes got ahead of public ideas about justice, and they suffered from powerful backlash in return.[4]

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's natural desires to be admired and sought after by men made soft repression in the form of ridicule highly effective in dissuading women from association with the movement. 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

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4. This is not to suggest that social change agents should not push hard against injustice; indeed, that is their job, to expose the injustices and push for the change that others are not ready for. We merely point out that the type of change strategy embodied in *Brown* and *Roe*, while perhaps necessary to force open sealed doors, can also have adverse effects. Our goal is to elaborate the dynamics of such resistance so that radicals and movement organizers may be best informed about the possible consequences of their chosen strategies. What radicals should do with such information is an important strategic point, though not one we can address fully here. All social movements are hydra-headed. They comprise many strands, some reformist and some radical, that are often spontaneously generated and not centrally (or in any way) coordinated, making it impossible for any group to choose a strategy for the movement as a whole.

to be, a powerful deterrent to women calling themselves feminists (Houvouras and Carter 2008; Huddy, Neely, and Lafay 2000). Apart from lesbian separatists, of whom there are few, most women live, work, and interact with men on a daily basis, and they do not wish to engage their anger or disapproval, which even saying the word "feminist" can sometimes do. The social movements for black and women's civil rights thus faced different kinds of backlash, with state repression more prominent in the former and ridicule/soft repression prominent in the latter. The different forms of backlash affected these movements differently.

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. Similarly, when in the mid-1970s opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment organized against it on the grounds that it might give women the right to state funding of abortions, proponents of the ERA argued that the amendment would not apply to abortion. Reva Siegel points out, for example, that Phyllis Schlafly's "success in mobilizing opposition to the ERA forced the women's movement to take account of her, in ways that shaped its constitutional advocacy for decades."[5]

In a backlash, the absolute levels of power involved may vary. Backlash can result from any loss of power as capacity, even from a small base. Highly traditional Jews who are appalled to see their children marrying Gentiles often try to mobilize a backlash. They may be only partially successful because, although they may have high levels of coercive

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5. Siegel 2006, 1394: "The effect was to discipline the ways feminists reasoned about the sex equality principle under the ERA, leading the movement to embrace positions with which it was increasingly at odds."

power vis-à-vis their children, they have relatively little vis-à-vis the forces of modernization. But those parts of their actions that consist of coercive power, in contrast to attempts at persuasion, constitute a backlash.

Sometimes the power situation is more complicated. In feminist politics, Betty Friedan touched off a backlash within the National Organization for Women in 1972 when she referred to lesbians within the organization as a "lavender menace." The lesbians had previously had capacities in some respects similar to those of straight women in the organization (at least in being considered equal members) and now found those capacities threatened. They reacted by quitting or threatening to quit the organization unless NOW changed its policies. Their actions and the ensuing support they received from straight women within the organization forced NOW quickly to endorse a platform of lesbian rights as among its core values. While Friedan's comments themselves may have been a backlash on the part of a disgruntled straight woman (caused by her own reduced power as capacity and threatening sanctions on those who reduced that capacity), the lesbians' threats of sanction in response to their reduced capacity after her remarks can also be considered a backlash, even though the lesbians were a numerical minority in contrast to heterosexuals in the organization.

Coercive power and persuasion are often inextricably mixed. That is, what we call "backlash" and the mutual back and forth of deliberative interchange are hard to disentangle. To the degree that Friedan's remarks were an argument on the merits drawing attention to the political problems the organization might incur if it were associated with lesbianism, those remarks would not be coercive power. Nor would the lesbians' point that the association would be less attractive to them if it took an antilesbian stance. In both cases, it is impossible in practice to disentangle the coercive power of a threat (Friedan's threat to make the lesbians feel uncomfortable and the lesbians' threat to quit) from a statement of fact that the organization should, on its merits, take into consideration. But the practical impossibility of disentangling these two strands does not make them equivalent analytically. Moreover, backlash is not just a reaction of the majority against the minority. A minority, too, can initiate a backlash if it feels its power as capacity to be threatened, and it can prevail politically not only by using its power as coercion to exploit a weakness in the organization (such as threatening to quit just when the organization needs all its troops) but also by convincing a sizable portion of the majority that it has justice on its side.

In the case of lesbians in NOW, as in the response of white northern liberals to the sight of fire hoses and police dogs turned on peaceful black civil rights marchers in Alabama, norms of justice played a major role. Although it may have been in the material interests of straights and whites to support a system that privileged them for being straight or white, their exposure to new conceptions of justice could deeply influence their behavior and even, in some cases, their identities.

When movements inspire reaction, including the rise of countermovements, that reaction need not be wholly or at all about power, either coercive or as capacity. In the United States, the reaction by the Left to the U.S.-led war against and occupation of Iraq may have come not from a "decline in a felt sense of power" (e.g., the power as capacity of left-wing groups under President Bill Clinton to have their preferences for peace cause peace) but, rather, from convictions that the change in question was wrong. Similarly, the reaction of the Right to the feminist movement undoubtedly included not only a response with coercive power to loss of capacity but also a simple conviction that the feminist movement was wrong. It is not easy in practice to distinguish between wanting to right a perceived wrong and wanting to return to a situation where one had greater capacity to turn one's preferences or interests into outcomes. But the distinction that defines backlash as a reaction with coercive power to loss of power as capacity is critical analytically.

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., California's Proposition 187 in 1994). It could apply to a case of violent 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., most 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. If distinguishing between power and persuasion in this context and deciding to use the term only for coercive power helps future investigators sort out what is going on, then they will have reason to adopt the stipulative definition we have carved out from ordinary speech. If future investigators find it more useful to include acts of persuasion, then this part of our argument should not catch on. In any case, we hope that this more neutral definition and approach to the study of backlash will make the phenomenon more amenable to the investigations of social science and help further our understanding of the dynamics embedded in reactions against social movements and change agents.

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Gender Backlash in American Politics?

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In this essay, I start to sketch a research agenda about an electoral backlash against women's descriptive representation. Few scholars have considered the possibility of such a backlash. By "backlash," I mean resistance to attempts to change the status quo. As Jane Mansbridge and Shauna Shames argue in this issue, when actors disadvantaged by the status quo work to enact change, they may be met by a reaction by those seeking to maintain existing power arrangements. In the following pages, I introduce the idea of a backlash against women's representation, propose several preliminary hypotheses about a backlash, and discuss ways of testing them.

A backlash against women's descriptive representation may seem unlikely. We typically assume that increases in women's representation