

Against Mine Too: Rape-as-Politics Revisited

by Samuel Hux (July 2015)

Is eating a revolutionary or conservative act? That is, when you lunch or sup or break fast with another human being, what is its political dimension? When one shovels it into a generously open mouth with teeth exposed and tongue darting, or when one slips it passed purse-like tight lips. . . is the first an expression of the proud, defiant ostentation of the possessing classes and the second a sign of the social *ressentiment* of the seething dispossessed, or is the one the public disguise of the other?

I'd hate to ask these questions seriously, although someone eventually will or perhaps already has. There is little in our experience that cannot be politicized, if intentions are persistent enough and an audience greedy for diverting instruction is there.

But even so, eating would not cease and dyspepsia would not automatically result from the publicity. Eating is enough of an absolute necessity to sustain itself. Even a gourmand reaches a point—hunger or sheer gastronomic delight—when chewing and swallowing is an unthinking act. However intentional one may be in the preparation of food, in the devouring of it one cannot usually sustain a conscious relationship with it. Nonetheless, were I a dietician, and were there a national epidemic of nervous indigestion, I would hesitate to burden the eating public with the wisdom that each time one lifts morsel to mouth the cock of the fork represents a political gesture. For I'd wonder if my analysis promised cure or complication.

But of course dining *can* be a sexual dance, a kind of foreplay, as anyone knows who ever saw the film of *Tom Jones*—Tom and Mrs. Waters, with succulent breast of fowl, signaling over board what they will do in bed; or as anyone knows who has ever eased with a costly meal the advances to be made a couple of hours later (your place or mine for a nightcap?) And sex does, of course, have a “political” dimension, in the broadest application of the word: two human beings are drawn out of themselves to meet in a mutual space between them. And just as war is politics by other means, as Clausewitz said it, there is a certain “tactical” quality to sex, even between two willing lovers: “flowery combat” as the *Kama Sutra* says it. Although “tactics” itself need not mean taking-advantage, assaulting-the-exposed-flank; it can mean a kind of tender and respectful artfulness: “The boat responded / Gaily, to the hand expert with

sail and oar. / The sea was calm, your heart would have responded / Gaily, when invited, beating obedient / To controlling hands," as one of the voices of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* muses.

I don't think one could argue very convincingly that sexual love as an *art* (virtuoso technique aside and something quite different) has ever been the norm in our culture. Rather, relationships have just as often been awkward, clumsy, and destructive—affection yielding to roles, habit, stupidity, and occasionally the death of the soul, with "compatibility" often meaning not much more than resignation to that above. But I don't think either that one could argue that the vaunted sexual revolution of recent decades has been much more successful than many revolutions of the past in righting wrongs supposedly rebelled against (leaving aside some improvements in job opportunities). The "art of love" comes more and more to mean something like "the method of onanistic gratification practiced with another onanist" or "the technique of coup-de-corps to seize and appropriate the dominant position long enjoyed by the other," or "the means by which to exact, along with an orgasm, a confession of guilt for centuries of chauvinism."

One reason is that the revolution has too often attracted the same sort of ideologue that previous revolutions have: the militant intent upon venting rage, or enjoying the heady excitement of the prolongation of hostilities once the upper hand is gained, but hesitant to accept a mutual, just, and fruitful peace which might be—like all peace in comparison to battle—just a little boring. A world of lovers is as dull to some as liberal democracy is to Maoists.

All the above is preface to an imaginary conversation—"imaginary" because I am not going to allow myself to have it (not anymore!), although it would be exceptionally easy to have. I have grown much too impatient to talk to fools. Let us say this is about twenty years ago, before my impatience set in. I am having lunch, say, with a colleague. She doesn't have to be a she, but he might; it's only necessary that it be the sort of person who "keeps abreast," is "on top of things," and who wouldn't be caught dead not. "Terrible, the events in Bosnia," I lead. "But not surprising," she says. "Oh, I don't know," I say, "even given the historic enmities in the Balkans. . . ." "That's not what I mean," she says. "I know it isn't," I sigh. "Rape is a political act," she explains; "*it's what all men do.*" I take out my pistol and shoot her in the knee-caps. This is *my* imaginary conversation after all—and in the imagination it's O.K. to make fools suffer, not lightly.

The mass raping of women in *ci-devant* Yugoslavia was surprising only to the ideologically committed but historically illiterate. And given events since in an "age of terrorism" I

cannot imagine anyone surprised now. But wartime rape by combatants—previous to recent decades—seldom rose above (or descended below?) the disgusting level of “spoils of war”: they seldom were approved politico-military tactics, as all evidence suggests the Serbian rapes, setting new trends, were. But I suspect that surprise or its absence doesn’t really enter into the matter. I suspect rather that a certain kind of mind is pleased to offer the Balkan rapes and their offspring, so to speak, as corroboration of a stunning thesis announced some years ago:

Man’s discovery that his genitals could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of pre-historic times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From pre-historic times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear.

So perhaps it is time—not for a review, since you don’t review books forty years or so old—but for a brief reconsideration of one of the most influential tracts of our time, Susan Brownmiller’s 1975 thriller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. “Rather than society’s aberrants or ‘spoilors of purity,’ men who commit rape have served in effect as front-line masculine shock troops, terrorist guerillas in the longest sustained battle the world has ever known.”

“That’s what rape is all about, isn’t it?” I’m glad she asked, even if the question was only rhetorical.

Since rape must be, like war, politics by other means, Brownmiller was eager to dismiss the notion that it has anything to do with lust, even perverted lust. “Rape is a dull, blunt, ugly act committed by punk kids, their cousins and older brothers, not by charming, witty, unscrupulous, heroic, sensual rakes, or by timid souls deprived of a ‘normal’ sexual outlet, or by *super-menschen* possessed of uncontrollable lust. And yet, on the shoulders of these unthinking, predictable, insensitive, violence-prone young men there rests an age-old burden that amounts to an historic mission: the perpetuation of male domination over women by force.” I am curious to know if the battered-child syndrome is a similar instance of advanced political consciousness—but I’m afraid to ask.

I would think that there are many kinds of rapists, and, Brownmiller to the contrary, her “unextraordinary, violence prone fellow” is a meaningless mean, a statistician’s creation at best without mind or blood, and that while some are punk kids, etc., some *are* “charming. . . sensual rakes,” some *are* sexually deprived “timid souls,” and some *are* animals “possessed of

uncontrollable lust." I don't know what the point is of denying the complexity of fact, unless it simply does not square with one's thesis.

But I will agree there is a kind of rapist who may be close to a prototype and who is easily disguised as a relatively violent ordinary fellow—since we know there is a certain order of "regular guys" who like not only hanging out together but clinging and clutching together, experiencing the deepest intensifications of positive feeling in association, sharing their *machismo*. I hesitate to use the word I may be expected to employ. In quarrels between male and female over the nature of rape, it would be ugly for the most unlikely assailant of a woman's parts to get it in the neck: the gay bystander. But I'm not talking about gayness, tenderness and intimacy with one's own sex and physical avoidance of the other. I'm talking about contempt for and violation of the other. What should one call this—*sado-macho* or some such coinage? I wish it would stick. Even if for the sake of taste, diplomacy, and considered fairness one calls it "male perversion," one knows one is only trying to avoid giving offense. After all, does it require some fantastic mental adventurousness to suggest that a physical attack upon the opposite sex, *with* and *against* the very organs of sexual difference, implies a basic hatred of the opposite sex (whatever the complexities of the individual psychological history) which in turn would at least seem to imply an unresolved and unadmitted preference for one's own?

But Brownmiller dismissed any such possibility even in the case of gang-rape or pair-rape. This seems to me a kind of willed blindness. After all, one has to be exceptionally fastidious (that word is a gift!) to ignore the fact that in gang-rape all but the leader are fornicating in another male's fluids, and even the leader is leaving his stuff to mix with others'. But I suppose that fixing intently on such graphic evidence of perversion might be inconvenient if one wishes to push the thesis that rape is a political act in service of a historic mission of which *all men* secretly approve.

Now, Brownmiller referred a lot to the male who denies that rape even exists. One knows his argument. When I was a student in a university in one of the southern states—down where men have been known to scratch their privates in public and women to cower and know their place—I lived on the outskirts of town near a service station where you got gas, cigarettes, the local paper, a beer. A place with a shifting but regular cast of characters. The owner—witty, amusing, profane; a silent black of sixty or so who manages not to hear all that's said; a red-haired giant full of incoherent opinions, who works when someone wants furniture moved non-union scale; a salesman avoiding the return home; a political science professor, trousers half-zipped through habitual slovenliness and tie greasy, ignored in his young department but accepted here as an educated voice supporting the White Citizens' Councils. I walked in one

day for a paper, interrupting a vigorous seminar without disputants. "There aint no such thing as rape!" the giant was proclaiming. "Bullshit," I muttered. "C'm'ere, boy," he commanded, with a surprisingly tolerant one of voice. "Y' see this 'ere bottle? Le'me see y' stick y'r finger in it." Then he began to move the bottle in circles before me; and, in truth, I couldn't. But then I screamed in his face; he froze; and I slipped a finger in. "That aint fair!" he protested, missing the point.

I think that service station was full of potential rapists, of the "ordinary" sort; and for all I know there may have been an actual rapist there. The policeman who used to say "Why don't you go on home now, honey, and think it over; why do you want to cause the guy trouble?" might have found the atmosphere there perfectly congenial. It's an atmosphere dissociated from any particular project—nothing in a purposive sense is being *done* (neither game won, animal hunted, nor military goal achieved)—but associated with simple mutual presence. Nor should one imagine a sullen boredom for the regulars ("Nothing better to do"), for contact is made, rhythms flow, secret wells are tapped. And as the specific instance suggests, it's an atmosphere of contempt for woman and a certain relish at her violation: she has no character; aside from one's needs she does not exist; she deserves what she gets—and she really wanted what she got. I suggest that the "ordinary" rapist, potential or accomplished, is the fellow who does not believe that rape exists.

The male response to the news of a rape is a complex thing, especially if he is close to the victim, and often unsatisfactory. Images of gallantry do not immediately spring to mind. What we know of affected people we know, and codifications of response in myth and literature, readily bring to mind images of crippled embarrassment, suspicions to greater or lesser degree of *some-little-bit?* of complicity, and—as Brownmiller justly pointed out—rage at the sullyng of a possession. None of these responses are truly a facing of the rape itself: the psychological attention is spent by the affected male upon himself. In that sense at least it's a denial of rape. And who but a fool would deny the existence of such crippled responses?

But on the other hand isn't it foolish, cynical, merely polemical, to deny any other kind of response? Brownmiller could imagine the father, brother, husband, or lover responding with all sorts and gradations of self-involvement of the kinds suggested above, bringing forth shame, impotence, estrangement, depending upon the familial or sexual relationship with the victim. But somehow it seemed beyond her intention to find a response that could be considered honest. It *should* occur to one that the husband, let us say, could be enraged, scarred with anguish, distraught, hurt, quite simply because the woman is hurt and because he *loves* her. But given her premises, how could Brownmiller have considered such a possibility? For

what is love? It can't be, evidently, anything a man feels for a woman, the subject being so conspicuously absent as a consideration in a book about men and women. Can a woman feel anything like it for a man? Something like it: fear. "Female fear of an open season of rape, and not a natural inclination toward monogamy, motherhood, or love, was probably the single causative factor in the original subjugation of woman by man, the most important key to her historic dependence, her domestication by protective mating."

Now I realize that there is a serious school of thought, with which I am not unsympathetic, which sees the evolutionary origins of the love-bond in the ritualization of aggressive behavior. Nonetheless, the result *is* the love-bond, now these aeons later. But the particular aggressive behavior Brownmiller imagined to be the evolutionary origin of the male-female relationship in so far as it is monogamous results not in *bond* but in *bondage* and doubtful love (non-existent on the one hand, mere weakness on the distaff). Unless one is seriously to dismiss monogamy as bondage, pure and simple, why should one *now* resent its origin (if that is indeed what it is)?—unless, again, one feels that the threat of rape by male society not only started the whole thing but keeps it going. But I fear I take Brownmiller's "anthropology" too seriously.

When Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* appeared in 1975 to generally enthusiastic reviews, those few reviewers who demurred from the celebration must have felt some of the sting: If you disagree with this bold thesis you are clearly threatened by the uncomfortable truth—"in denial," as pop intellectuals like to say. The author was swiftly established as the world's foremost rape maven. For a while not a week passed that one did not hear of the book. Its fame was universal. A couple of years after its publication it was recommended to me—who had begun to pretend ignorance of it in futile attempt to avoid yet another conversation—by a Scandinavian psychoanalyst vacationing in Spain: a work of great force and wisdom. A few months later I was told much the same thing by the English wife of a North-Sea oil rigger.

If one hears less of it now, that does not mean it has blown over—quite the contrary. One hears her arguments as casual assumptions in ordinary conversation with no mention of Brownmiller's name—much as one might refer to an Oedipal conflict without bothering to say "As Freud said. . . ." No longer a trendy view hard to dismiss because so stunning, Brownmiller's thesis has become the common knowledge of people who, as I put it earlier, "keep abreast," members of (Joseph Epstein's marvelous phrase) "the with-it-ry." It has become *Wisdom*. And I am convinced that in its now-disguised form as casual assumption of the withitry unattached to a particular book, as disembodied cultural common sense, so to speak, it is even more corrupting of public discourse. It is silent foundation of the pre-judgment which supports right-thinking people (actually *left*-thinking) who need no evidence in order to just

know that fictions like the Duke lacrosse team story and the University of Virginia fraternity epic are self-evident facts.

Does this numbing thesis, *The Wisdom*, teach us anything about the rapes in the Balkans and now the Middle East? After all, it "should." That tragic experience, which my imaginary colloquist (her knees long since nicely recovered, thank you) assumes to be corroboration, can be a kind of test case. *The Wisdom* teaches us nothing. To say that it does we would have to make the astoundingly stupid assumption that—to take the Balkan instance—the Serbian aggression was not about geographic possession and ethnic obsession at all, that all the obvious reasons for war are but excuses to facilitate what Brownmiller called "the longest sustained battle the world has ever known."

On the other hand, do the Balkan and Islamist rapes teach us anything about the notion that rape is *in essence* a political act instead of what we commonsensically damned well know it is?: something that individual scum do to women, sometimes singly, sometimes in packs, for all sorts of pathological reasons. They should teach us that, yes, rape can be used politically. Just as murder can.

Rejection of *The Wisdom* doesn't obligate one to come up with an alternative explanation of Balkan or Islamist rapes (as if *The Wisdom* were itself an alternative). Some men will always be ready to commit rape out of their own pathologies. What is odd is that—focusing now only on the Balkan case—an irredentist political movement which would prefer to be thought merely revanchist, which is desirous of the international good will it thinks unjustly denied it, would choose to co-ordinate so many pathologies, thereby making any peace but a criminal one an impossibility. Or perhaps it's not so odd. The Balkans were a manifest image of the Hobbesian world we are foolish (and a-historical) to forget is always just below the crust. "Only part of us is sane: only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our nineties and die in peace, in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations." So judged Dame Rebecca West in her masterful 1941 examination of Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

(And while I'm at it, I should make an important distinction between the south Slavic rapes and the Islamist. Not even the most committed Brownmillerist would be foolish enough to argue—I hope—that Islamo-Nazi cocksman are fighters for the domination of *all men* over *all* women, since their fervent desire is that all men Christian and Jewish suffer decapitation.

Indeed, were anyone so foolish as to imagine ISIS, for instance, as recruits in the “longest sustained battle the world has ever known,” this would amount, ironically, to a relative improvement of Islamic State’s image.)

The “longest sustained battle the world has ever known” is between human being and human being. We should not claim too much for rape; we end up, ironically, trivializing it, diminishing it to the mere size of a subject for polemic. No matter how serious Brownmiller was and her progeny are they are profoundly unserious people: their ideas are slippery games, self-congratulatory, proclaimedly-brave theories about dangerous actions contemplated by people leading safe lives. I’ll give you a more recent example of what I mean. It was impossible for some to believe that that unattractive human being George Zimmerman did not murder Trayvon Martin instead of killing in self-defense because they have been so cosseted, so lucky in life, that they have never thought they themselves were about to die.

So I should confess that I do not write from a disinterested point of view. But it is something a great deal more profound than wounded male pride or some such that moves me. I know a woman, indeed the love of my life, who—in another time, another country, *and in a dark forest, no less!*—would have been a victim but for her courage, clear head, acute psychological grasp of her terrorizer, and—let’s speak of grace under pressure!—therapeutic inventiveness. (That she is a school-mate of Brownmiller suggests the size of this ironic world.) The merest thought of what might have happened alternately enrages and unnerves me. And I remark in passing that don’t feel the least gratitude toward that guerrilla I’m told was acting in the interest of my male sovereignty.

What is so pernicious about *The Wisdom* is that the two who have the most to gain from controlling rape (its eradication is out of the question) are set against one another, the woman who is potential victim and the man who loves her. His love is her bondage, so we are told, and the punk in the alley works for him.

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