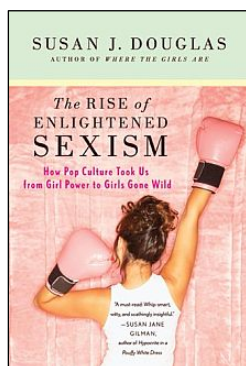
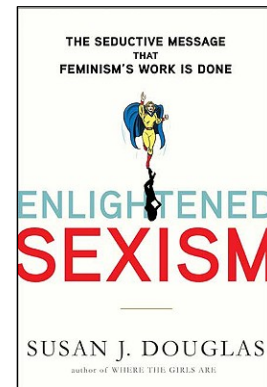


Susan J. Douglas, **Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work is Done**, New York: Times Books, 2010, 368 pp, \$26.00 (hardcover).¹

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With biting wit, Susan Douglas' *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work is Done* sets out to historicize the ever growing divide between the image and the reality of women in the United States. Refusing to fall for the trope of "post-feminism," Douglas is quick to point out that the current state of women's affairs is not reflective of the supposed successful completion of feminism, but is rather an indication of the insidious development of a cultural practice coined as "enlightened sexism." Defined as "feminist in its outward appearance . . . but sexist in its intent," enlightened sexism takes shape through carefully crafted representations of women that are "dedicated to the undoing of feminism" (p. 10). Douglas' refusal of the conceptualization of this phenomenon as "post-feminism" stems from an astute observation that the current miserable state of women's affairs in the United States is not to be blamed on feminism (as the peddlers of enlightened sexism would have you think), but on "good, old-fashioned, grade-A sexism that reinforces good, old-fashioned, grade-A patriarchy" (p. 10). Aside from tracing the genealogy of enlightened sexism, this book emphasizes the sociopolitical consequences that are concealed beneath such a mentality, such as the systematic disenfranchisement of poor women and women of color under the so-called liberatory system of consumer capitalism, all while contradictory representations of women are disseminated as "proof" that the liberation of women has been achieved.



Focusing her analysis on the resurgence of feminism that took place in the 1990s, Douglas points to Susan Faludi's 1991 national bestseller *Backlash* as the force that set the women's movement pendulum into motion again; Faludi's tome outlined the growth of antifeminism in 1980s as a response to the rise of second-wave feminism of the 1970s (Faludi, 2006). If one were to follow this pattern of pendulum swinging, it would be easy to suggest that the period after the 1990s would revert to the antifeminist sentiments of the 1980s. For Douglas, though, such a conclusion is only partially correct. What she finds particularly repugnant in the particular flavor of antifeminism that has risen to popularity in the millennial age is that, through the development of enlightened sexism, antifeminism has been disguised as feminism, leading to the myth of post-feminism that Douglas resists. In this sense, enlightened sexism is the backlash that not even Faludi saw coming. As the glorification of women's supposed equal standing in U.S. society

¹ Also published as *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010, 384 pp, \$15.99 (paperback).

has reached an all-time high, Douglas sets out to reopen the case for feminism by unmasking deceptive representations of women that have saturated American culture. *Enlightened Sexism* is intended as a call to arms and functions as a cold, hard slap in the face of the consumer capitalist interpellation to which white, upper-middle-class America has acquiesced.

For Douglas, there is an important precursor to enlightened sexism, and that is *embedded feminism*: fictional characters of the early 1990s who were strong-willed, independent, even bitchy, all while not only maintaining but also stoking the fires of feminine sex appeal. These seemingly feminist figures in mainstream media were not dangerous in and of themselves, but when taken into consideration within the larger cultural context of the times—namely the titillating news headlines of women masterminding and perpetrating violent acts—such fictional representations were construed as a potential threat to the status quo. The mechanism responsible for producing embedded feminist representations, such as Candice Bergen's character on *Murphy Brown*, was the media's proliferation of "fantasies of power" (p. 5), that is, feminist phantasms that were eagerly subsumed by women and girls during the 1990s. Fantasy or not, the cultural mood was ripe for a reinjection of feminism in politics and society, as indicated by the rapid rise of the Riot Grrrl scene in 1992 and the Health and Human Services "Girl Power" public service announcements in 1997 (p. 24, 44). Douglas goes on to chronicle the equally rapid degeneration of American attitudes towards feminism that followed, ironically branding the first decade of the 21st century as "post-feminist."

The embedded feminism of the early 1990s television world, combined with the scintillating headlines of women who were pegged by the media as "out of control," laid the groundwork for enlightened sexism. Women who had suffered abuse and manipulation by men for years and who had turned the tables on female victimization were demonized in the media, setting off a backlash of Faludian proportions. As Douglas writes, all of this came to a head, so to speak, during the Anita Hill and Lorena Bobbit cases, two instances in which women fought back, literally and figuratively, against male dominance and abuse. The nation became gripped with actual *castration anxiety*: "[H]ere was a cultural brew about gender in which female achievement—and transgression—heightened ever-present nervousness about gender roles, the dangers of female power, and the pathos of emasculated men" (p. 56). This combination of fictional images of strong, powerful women alongside the ripped-from-the-headlines dramas of the 1990s set the ball rolling for enlightened sexism, leading Douglas to ask: What prompted the guardians of patriarchal hegemony to promote the sexual exploitation of women and the oversexualization of children as the destined liberatory result of the feminist movement?

Enter Janet Reno. President Clinton's appointment of Reno as Attorney General symbolized an important moment in the embedding of feminism within American culture. Embedded feminism had begun to move out of the media and entertainment sphere and into the federal government, and according to the heteropatriarchal beauty standards that the media adhered to, it was not pretty. Janet Reno, one of the most powerful women in U.S. government at the time, was a woman who rejected every conformist notion of femininity and therefore struck fear into the hearts of male media pundits everywhere. She was, as Douglas asserts, "a constant reminder that gender is not embedded in biology, but is an arbitrary cultural construct" (p. 73). Reno was perceived as the symbolic icing on the stereotypical feminist cake—humorless, normatively unattractive, and gender-non-conforming. The castration anxiety of the mid-

1990s developed into full-on male hysteria, as American men began to question their own masculinity in the face of what they believed to be declining adherences to femininity. Douglas asserts that this was a major contributing factor to the rise of the "the new girliness" phenomenon. She posits that the patriarchal U.S. culture truly believed that feminism had gone "out of control" and that the only way to curb such a phenomenon was through the hegemonic reinforcement of femininity.

Framed through the idea of choice, the new girliness phenomenon began to permeate pop culture with the rationale that feminism has provided women with sexual and social liberation, and part of that liberation includes the freedom to be feminine; therefore, the greater the deployment of femininity (especially sex appeal), the greater the liberation. It is just this type of logic that brings new meaning to Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that "the attitude of defiance of many American women proves that they are haunted by a sense of their femininity" (de Beauvoir, 2009, p. 148). Enlightened sexism wants women to believe that empowerment is achieved by succumbing to the haunting of femininity. It is this rationale that accommodates such television shows as *Girls Gone Wild* and *Sex and the City*, where empowerment is something to be found through a hyper-feminine, oversexualized performance of the post-feminist conception of white, upper-middle-class womanhood (p. 182). Such images are intended to relay the message that the work of feminism is done: Women have made it so far in American society that they now have the luxury to choose to be a promiscuous bimchette. For Douglas, the most troubling consequence lies in the contemporary counter-representations that still uphold the original principles of embedded feminism. Depictions such as the character of Miranda Bailey on *Grey's Anatomy* and the highly visible presence of women in government (Sandra Day O'Connor, Condoleezza Rice, Hilary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, and yes, even Sarah Palin), are just the sort of embedded feminism "that enlightened sexism crash[ed] up against and sought to erode" (p. 278). Such a juxtaposition of images—strong and diverse representations of women alongside airheaded eye candy—allows the men of the U.S. media and politics to disavow any accusation of institutionalized sexism while simultaneously throwing a green light up for the allowance of blatant, sexist objectification and exploitation of women. To borrow George Lipsitz's framework for understanding the modus operandi of racism (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 46), sexism has passed the historical threshold from the referential sexism that spawned the second wave to inferential sexism of the millennial age. Thus, embedded feminism, while still serving a much needed purpose of providing positive images of women, falls prey to inferential, enlightened sexism, the consequences of which are the false assumption that feminism's work is done.

Though *Enlightened Sexism* does take care to address issues of race and class, as particularly outlined in the chapter "You Go, Girl," it is clear that Douglas' intended audience is white, upwardly mobile women. This is in part fitting, as white upper-middle-class girls are the primary targets of enlightened sexism's capitalist marketing campaigns, yet it also bypasses important avenues through which to encourage coalition building, which is crucial to any form of organizing—feminist, anti-racist or otherwise. I appreciated Douglas' honesty regarding her feelings of envy toward the brazen, however false, figure of the invincible "sassy black woman," and such honesty is particularly telling when it is punctuated by a direct recognition of the problems inherent in such envy. Douglas calls out the media for producing phantasms of black women as endemically "loud, sassy and finger-snappin'" (p. 130) and faults the legacy of exclusion of black women's voices during the second wave, linking the women's movement's neglect of black women to the proliferation of derogatory, unattainable fantasies of power that representations of

black women convey. Douglas writes: "White women have to take a clear-eyed look at [these representations], because such images not only hold black women down, they elevate someone like me at their expense" (p. 132). Douglas is speaking directly to the white, middle-class women of her generation: those who came of age reading *The Feminine Mystique*, who sustained Susan Faludi's *Backlash* on the *New York Times* bestseller list for months on end, and who ignored the needs and desires of women of color in the 1970s, only to later foist the burden of transgression onto those very same women of color at the turn of the millennium. Though the intended audience for her book is therefore limited, Douglas deserves credit for confronting her audience about the inferential white supremacy inherent when white women remain silent and complicit as women of color bear the weight of patriarchy.

Enlightened Sexism is intended as an intervention in the so-called post-feminist world. It is a battle cry for the women of her daughter's generation. Douglas is challenging women and girls to "talk back" to the media, by identifying and speaking out against the enlightened sexism that permeates even the most well-intentioned of representations (p. 306). Since it is a trade publication, *Enlightened Sexism* is written predominantly in the vernacular, with little reference to theory and none, if any, jargon. Her humorous writing is infused with unselfconscious personal anecdotes, which, in turn, serve to make this book quintessentially opposed to the haggard stereotype of the humorless, joyless, sexless, man-hating feminist persona. *Enlightened Sexism* sustains itself as a critical text while remaining accessible to women and girls who may not identify themselves as feminists, but who may identify as post-feminist. This book has tremendous potential as a teaching tool for young women, particularly young girls of the millennial age who are ensconced in the rhetoric of post-feminism and the imagery of enlightened sexism. Douglas challenges these girls to educate themselves, organize, and ultimately to take up the "unfinished business of the women's movement" (p. 306).

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