

Book Reviews

Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*.

Lindsay Steenberg

Hollywood's obsession with aggressive female sexuality is long standing and has produced some of the cinema's most iconic characters, from Rita Hayworth's femme fatale in *Gilda* to band geek Michelle, in *American Pie*. From noir to frat pack, the sexual enthusiasm and availability of female characters has shifted in articulation, even as it has remained a central spectacle. Contemporary post-feminist Hollywood celebrates a perceived sexual liberation that is, in fact, a stand in for *sexualised* performance. In her book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Ariel Levy takes her reader on an anthropological journey into the seamy underbelly of postfeminist sexuality, from mother-daughter stripper-cise to bacchanalian preteen blow-job parties. Along the way, Levy proposes the term "Female Chauvinist Pig" to describe "women who make sex objects of other women and of [them]selves" (4), and argues that "raunch culture" is the sex-as-playboy fascinated cultural context that makes this woman possible.

Levy is a contributing editor at *New York Magazine* and her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Vogue* among others. Her book's attempt at an academic treatment of female sexuality in American culture is compromised at times by her journalist style. For example, she offers descriptions of the personal appearance of every woman she talks about: 70s feminist, Susan Brownmiller "was a fine-featured brunette" (46), CEO of *Playboy*, Christie Hefner "has good skin and a short French manicure" (38). Despite this, the main point of her piece is refreshingly atypical of the neo-liberal popular press: she argues that women are confusing sexual power with the *performance* and *commodification* of sexuality (i.e. being a stripper or a porn star has nothing to do with enjoying sex and everything to do with simulating and selling it). In order to support her argument she draws attention to the troubling contradictions central to cultural phenomena such as the "*Girls Gone Wild*" video series, women's self

help books written by porn stars, such as Jenna Jameson, and "cardio-striptease" programmes made popular by Oprah Winfrey.

Levy, like her more academic counterparts, has fallen into the trap of idealising the 2nd wave feminism of the 1970s as the true site of authentic feminism. She creates a utopian picture of the late sixties as sex-positive, revolutionary and populated by educated and uncompromising women who were changing the world for the better. She describes this period as "...the days when feminism was fun, women's liberation was an adventure that involved stakeouts and bloodless coups and victory celebrations for the conquering heroines" (85). Similarly, she uses female appearance as a litmus test for feminist expression, mournfully explaining the difference between a perceived femtopia of the 70s and post-feminist raunch culture:

"Instead of hairy legs, we have waxed vaginas; the free-flying natural woman boobs of yore have been hoisted with push-up bras or 'enhanced' into taut plastic orbs that stand perpetually at attention. What has moved into feminism's place as the most pervasive phenomenon in American womanhood is an almost opposite *style*, attitude, and set of principles" (87, emphasis mine).

This deeply ingrained nostalgia for a time when feminism was simple and virtuous is not only a misrepresentation of this complicated and conflicted time in American social history, it is also framed as an ideal against which all attempts at feminism must necessarily fail. Therefore, Levy's is a particularly bleak outlook on contemporary culture, and an ever bleaker outlook on the young women of today; one that trades on the idea of a feminism that existed only in the imagined past. Of teen sexuality, and female sexuality in particular she concludes:

"None of this can possibly be 'ironic' for teens because it's their whole truth – there's no backdrop of idealism to temper these messages. If there's a way in which grown women are appropriating raunch as a rebellion against the constraints of feminism, we can't say the same for teens. They never had a feminism to rebel against" (169).

This nostalgia is accompanied by a deep anxiety about female sexuality

that transgresses the boundaries of the acceptable, and Levy takes a concerned anthropological tone as she interviews lesbian women who identify themselves as "bois", junior high school girls who confess explicit sexual experiences, and drunken college women who happily volunteer to show their breasts on "*Girls Gone Wild*." Levy frames herself as a shocked tourist in these worlds, with the expectation that her reader will feel the same. In positioning herself above and separate from her subjects in this way, she suggests that these women are deviant at worst, and tragically inappropriate at best. This, in turn, compromises some of the very significant points she has to make about the misogyny inherent in certain sub-cultural sexualities: they can be sexist, conservative and also confuse performing sex (and sexual identity) with enjoying it. Likewise, Levy draws attention to the consumerist drives behind much of the sex industry. After all, she rightly observes, sex *workers* are not enjoying themselves exclusively, but earning money.

In the case of the "bois," she draws attention to their "bros before hos" (138) mantra in which they vilify more traditionally feminine women even as they sexually pursue them. While this is a troubling catch phrase to live by, Levy's superficial treatment of women who identify themselves as bois, leaves no room for possible alternative sexual expression or pleasure. Levy observes (in some detail it must be said) the sexual activities and stories recounted by the bois, labels them anti-feminist and moves on. The same might be said of her treatment of very young women. She journeys into their world, describes their appearance, sexual habits and urban legends; and then despairs over their misguided sexual identity. There is an undercurrent of anxiety in these descriptions: loud, irresponsible lesbians and hyper-sexualised teenagers are something troubling and Levy positions them as threatening to healthy feminism.

However limited and reductive some of her case studies may be, I agree with the cornerstones of Levy's argument: the conflation of commodification and simulation with female sexual liberation; the sexualization of youth in media culture; and the glamorization of the sex

trade. Likewise, Levy's conception of a raunch culture resonates in a solipsistic postfeminist media culture that assumes all women have the choice to become strippers, and the desire to "Make Love Like a Porn Star." A neo-liberal Hollywood film industry feeds this culture and is fed by it. Contemporary films such as the *American Pie* franchise, *Sin City*, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Wedding Crashers* rejoice in representations of female sexuality as self-objectifying. Levy recognises how unpopular it is to draw attention to these facts. Her recurring, and unanswered questions is: "why does the new feminism look so much like the old objectification?"

Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*

Brenda Cromb

In the March 2007 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, columnist John Leonard described *Planet of Slums* author Mike Davis as "the radical urbanologist who knows everything, forgives nothing, and shows up periodically to terrify the bourgeoisie, less like a MacArthur Fellow than a Chupacabra, the goat-sucking vampire of Latin American folklore" (82). Leonard was talking about Davis' new book, a history of the car bomb, but it is equally relevant to his disquisition on global urban poverty: Davis is not out to make anyone feel better.

And with this subject matter, it is hard to imagine that he could. Though the poor in the "Third World" or the "Global South" or "Developing Countries" (any of those code words that refer to "places that are not Europe, white North America and Japan") are still often characterized as living in rural backwaters, the reality is that growing numbers – more than one billion worldwide – live in slums. This is a staggering number and Davis is full of staggering statistics. The book's first chapter and a half are loaded with numbers and tables, numbers and tables that make one wonder how things could have gotten this bad.

For instance, a table on page 28 lists the world's "megaslums," including fourteen neighbourhoods with one million or more residents. That there are enough of them to necessitate the coinage of the word "megaslum" ought to be staggering enough on its own. For

the curious, "Megaslums' arise when shantytown and squatter communities merge in continuous belts of informal housing and poverty, usually on the urban periphery" (26). Mexico City, where as of 1992 an estimated 6.6 million people lived in 348 square kilometers of informal housing, is number one on the list. All those numbers do get overwhelming, not because Davis's writing is dry – far from it – but because of their sheer largeness. The rapid growth of cities, and the percentage of the new city-dwellers who live their whole lives as squatters or renters of crowded tenement rooms – it is hard to wrap one's head around.

All these numbers, all this quantification, is necessary: Davis is counting people who generally are not counted. Not in censuses, not when cities are being planned, not when they are forced out of their neighbourhoods due to development or "beautification" (often literally), not when a city (like Seoul or Beijing) is hosting the Olympics, not when the IMF and the World Bank are demanding debt repayments that cut large swaths through the national budgets of African states. (Davis entitles one chapter which outlines the struggles of the informal worker "A Surplus Humanity?" The question mark, it turns out, is rhetorical.) But Davis does more than count out misfortune: he contextualizes it.

Davis outlines, in jargon-free language, the global geopolitical movements that have left so many people living ten to a room with no hope of getting out. Much (but not all – Davis notes the complicity of corrupt governments and the complacent middle classes, not to mention short-sighted First World "solutions") of the blame is laid at the door of the World Bank and the IMF, especially the "Structural Adjustment Plans" managed by the latter starting in the mid-1980s.

The 1980s – when the IMF and the World Bank used the leverage of debt to restructure the economies of most of the Third World – are the years when slums became an implacable future not just for poor rural migrants, but also for millions of traditional urbanites displaced or immiserated by the violence of "adjustment" (152).

The SAPs, which called for privatization of public services and the abandonment of state-supported

development, in order to speed repayments of national debt (including in the Congo, where the World Bank knew Mobutu was funneling much of the borrowed money directly into a personal Swiss bank account, with IMF demanding repayment from ordinary Congolese). Davis pulls no punches in pointing out the absurdity in the fact that "it is taken as 'normal' that a poor country like Uganda spends twelve times as much per capita on debt relief each year as on healthcare in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis" (153).

One of the downsides to the privatization of public utilities is that so many in developing countries are unable to afford them. One of the book's most affecting sections deals with "Living in Shit". "Constant intimacy with other people's waste [...] is one of the most profound of social divides," Davis tells us (138). This is, of course, not merely because of the smell. This kind of filth carries the kinds of diseases common to Victorian London, and which one would think could be eradicated in the twenty-first century. Post-colonial nations in Africa and South Asia are the worst off: the colonists never much bothered with things like sanitation for the locals, so the new rulers took over already-neglected systems. It is hard to be surprised when Davis – after outlining the health and feminist issues associated with being obligated to defecate in public – turns to pay toilets. For instance, "[i]n Ghana a user fee for public toilets was introduced by the military government in 1981; in the late 1990s toilets were privatized and are now described as a 'gold mine' of profitability" (141). This "gold mine" charges families 10 percent of one day's pay for toilet use.

It does not take much of a Freudian to guess why the very fact of millions of people literally living in excrement gets so little media attention. It is not a sexy problem, but Davis' unstinting exposition of already available data shows the extent to which this is not a series of localized issues, but a *global* trend. Slums and their attendant miseries are the results of capitalist globalization, and Davis is none too optimistic about capitalist plans to make them disappear. *Planet of Slums* is not an optimistic book, but it is not optimistic subject matter.