

### In the Darkroom by Susan Faludi (review)

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and vulnerable subjects, and she pleads for a shift in perspective that takes up this vulnerability as ontological and perceives the body as 'the medium of relations with others' with boundaries that are 'porous' (p. 47).

The area of ethics is, however, rather a pitfall of the book, as Wilcox seems to be hesitant to take it further and to question the intention of the politics around IR. The philosophy and theorization around the body within IR is shown to be the product and production of white, male, heterosexual men. Yet, Wilcox does not really delve into the possibility that this might also be connected to the fact that some people, nations, bodies benefit from this particular way of theorizing the body, even if that might result in particular blind spots in the understanding of the effects of, and counter-reactions to, current warfare. Thus the concrete and experiential side of bio-politics is touched upon by the author as she chooses different examples of warfare; yet it remains a little undertheorized. Finally, Wilcox's meticulous way of writing produces an extremely cogent argument, but at times the book does not flow.

To conclude, *Bodies of Violence* provides a clear and interesting contribution to how feminist theory on the body can be used within IR. It makes an important start on closing the gap between theorizations of the body as passive and reflective, and as active and productive. Its potential implications within the field of IR are significant, as Wilcox convincingly argues for a shift in ways of thinking about the ontology of the body. Wilcox systematically weaves her arguments into a well-structured framework that presents different perspectives and angles. Although she could perhaps have further addressed the possible advantages that the current theorization of the body in IR has for certain people, her critical assessment of the effects of contemporary warfare techniques does address power dynamics and differences within IR. The book is a valuable read for scholars both in the fields of IR and feminist theory, as well as those interested in the topics of warfare, bio-politics and technology.

## References

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- Kristeva J (1982) *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection*, trans. LS Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Susan Faludi, *In the Darkroom*, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2016; 417 pp.: 9780805089080<sup>1</sup>

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Susan Faludi, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist and author of *Backlash*, a book that marked an era and gave a name to society's adverse reaction to the achievement thus far of women's rights, has come out with a thick new volume. At first glance, the book appears as a simple not-at-all-conventional family saga. In 2004 the author received an email from her father in Budapest, whom she had not seen in decades, in which her father

informed her that s/he's undergone a sex change operation and has turned from Stephan (István) Faludi into Stephanie Faludi. *In the Darkroom* is the chronicle of those 10 years which started with Susan Faludi's arrival in Budapest upon receiving the above-mentioned email, and ends with Stephanie Faludi's death. In the meantime it recounts the way Susan Faludi attempted to discover who her parent really was. During those 10 years, through a process entirely controlled by Stephanie Faludi (who decided when and what kind of document she would reveal to her daughter in the dark cellar [room], what name she'd dropped, even the time when they could leave the house), Susan Faludi tries to understand her father – now mother – while exploiting her professional expertise and finally even to the last morsels of her inner strength.

Susan Faludi is an excellent journalist interested in facts: who did what, when and why? The story of István Faludi/Stephan Faludi/Stephanie Faludi/Stefánia Faludi/Stefi Faludi (and therefore her own life story as well) outsmarts her. Although the author seeks out each and every eyewitness from her father's life (from a Budapest Jewish Grammar School classmate, to the doctor who performed the sex change surgery in Puketh, Thailand, to relatives in Israel), and visits each and every locality from Budapest to Košice, still, the father's story, personality and decisions fall outside his journalist daughter's comprehension, moulded after the rationalist reasoning of European Enlightenment. On the other hand, the book is also about the practical battles of a feminist who stands for a politics of inclusion with herself and her emotions. Emotions that she knows she shouldn't have (for instance concerning Stefanie Faludi's fashion choices), but does nevertheless.

How can anyone understand the life of a Jewish teenager from Budapest who grows up surrounded by great wealth but no love, whose parents do not attend his bar mitzvah because of their personal feud? Using his skills in pretending that he acquired while participating in fights between adults, the boy saves his parents' lives (wearing an Arrow Cross armband he gets them out of Arrow Cross imprisonment), and solves many other difficult situations through faking. From the Cold War-era stamps in his passport to his own birth date, to the expert recommendation necessary for the sex change operation, all were falsifications. And these life-changing falsifications were all related to his capacity to appear as the person that those around him wanted to see, because he knew that this was the key to his survival. The last great battle of his life is to win back his daughter, who during her parents' divorce in the 1970s took her mother's side. This again was not independent of the fact that Stephan had hired a private detective to follow his wife, then attacked her new partner with a baseball bat and a knife in such a way that later he could frame the situation as one where he'd heroically saved his wife from an intruder. Despite this, during the divorce he unscrupulously dispossessed his wife by not paying alimony. His last battle against his wife – the woman to whom the Pulitzer-winning author has not yet devoted a book – the battle for Susan, he wins by undertaking a sex change operation and thus becoming Susan's mother. Stephan Faludi might have supposed that the mother–daughter relationship is altogether different from the father–daughter relationship; and he might have found it liberating that he did not have to act like a 'strong man' any more. In their previous, by no means harmonious, relationship he could start a new chapter by playing 'sisterhood' with his daughter, a committed representative of sisterhood. This is how Stefánia Faludi, by playing herself, arranges for her daughter to spend 10 years solving a puzzle that in essence does not exist. Because there is only form, but no body, no

content. Susan Faludi insisted on seeing Stefánia Faludi's corpse upon her death in the Szent János Hospital in Budapest (but she could not bear watching the entirety of the sex change operation footage as part of a mother–daughter programme). This is when the author states that there is a difference only between the living and the dead body, and that nothing matters that had previously happened to the body. (I surely would not want to be an essentialist, she says earlier, as these days it's a lethal sin.) But that is not the case.

Stefánia's Jewishness is central and essential in the book. Even if Stephen does not go to the synagogue after the Shoah, he listens to German Christmas songs in the United States and mails Christmas postcards. The only place where she gets embarrassed as a trans person is the Kazinczy Street Synagogue in Budapest, because her head is not covered. This shows how the limits of her trans identity are preformed. Whoever is born a Jew, remains a Jew, quotes Susan Faludi in the book. This cannot be acquired by surgery or via the consumerist performance of bubbling chirpiness around expensive women's clothing and make-up. The choice, performance and falsification of identity has limits for Stephanie. What's disconcerting is that Susan Faludi, an emblematic and programmatic figure of second wave feminism, narrows down female identity to free choice of labour and reproductive rights. By that she brackets a century long fight for women's equality as if it was something to be forgotten.

This is where we get to the core topic of the book: oblivion. The masterfully written book, in which each chapter and subchapter is just as round and smooth (and connected to the previous and following chapters) as the pearls of Susan's grandmother's necklace so cherished by Stefanie, tackles a greater question and necessarily leaves it unanswered.

The foundation of post-Second World War recommencement is the right to oblivion – states the book. The gas chambers and the neighbours' betrayals can be (and should be) forgotten, and one should act as if this process was entirely dependent on the individual. Those incapable of that – like Stefan Zweig or Primo Levi, as well as many anonymous contemporaries of theirs – were expelled by society; sometimes this took the form of supportive nods accompanying their suicides. Back then István Faludi walked the same path. First on the Brazilian seashore, he attempted to forget that the end of the war is only a temporary end of evil. Later in the US as the breadwinner of his family he tries to live the American dream: suburban house with a stay-at-home-wife raising two children (who naturally speak only English). However, when this dream collapses and his daughter even attends worship at a Born-Again Evangelical church, he bangs his daughter's head on the floor to remind her that after all, she is the descendant of a Jewish family of great tradition. When Stephen Faludi moves to Hungary in 1990, he wants to mould himself to that never-existing, non-antisemitic Austrian-Hungarian Empire which, apart from Sacher torte, also offered the greatest mobility in its era to its Jewish citizens, among them to István's (as he was called then) grandparents. Stephan, then Stefanie, votes for Fidesz out of hatred for the Communists, who according to him/her, had taken away their family possessions. He'd saved his family during the Shoah with pretence and astuteness, only to have it taken away by the Communists. István/Stephan/Stephanie/Stefánia/Stefi could never forgive nor forget that. Unlike the radicalization of Hungarian politics.

The volume does not picture Hungary very favourably, usually with reason. The infrastructure and intellectual foundations of contemporary Hungarian Holocaust-research are horrendous, and the sources diminish in the hands of the researcher. No matter that István

Faludi followed the activity of people's tribunals after the war, the termination of evil and extrusion ended with state-sanctioned oblivion. If oblivion is part of collective remembrance, then when can the individual bracket everything that has happened to them previously to a given moment? When can one get rid of one's own failure-narratives?

On the American bookmarket the volume is a fool-proof bestseller. Ever since athlete Caitlyn Jenner's sex change operation, which even President Obama congratulated in a tweet, trans\* rights and being trans\* is more accepted and perhaps even hip. The book surveys the history of trans\* struggles in the US from Magnus Hirschfeld through the first trans\* celebrity of the US in 1953, to Trans\* Studies becoming an acknowledged discipline. Networks of supporters, rights protectors and web-based trans communities share with each other their experiences, as well as, for instance, the narrative that one should present in the health care system when applying for a sex change. The book also introduces the Hungarian trans\* community within which Stefánia could not gather 10 people to create a foundation, because they were afraid to step out from the closet; so she once more turned to forgery: this time she counterfeited five signatures on the founding document. The book also introduces the researchers who were overjoyed to recognize Stefánia as the subject of their research except that for her this 'researchable' identity is also part of oblivion. The way Stefánia Faludi gradually let Susan Faludi closer to herself (or rather to a previously enacted herself) throughout the years is exactly how we get to know her layers of oblivion. It was surgery with which it became possible to erase everything – according to Stefánia at least – that ever happened to that body. The way Stefánia put the documents of her former life into neatly marked boxes and folders inside the cellar's dark room, the way she marked all that as essentially not her any more, saying in effect that her past does not matter any more, is exactly how Europe's dark and bitter post-1945 history was processed. This is the method with which we worked through or rather did not work through the factors leading to the Shoah and the Shoah itself: we very reasonably put it all in boxes with stickers. The way Susan Faludi introduces the key events of Hungarian political life for the average English-speaking readership, in other words, in a fairly superficial manner, brings home the truth that the desire for oblivion, for a recommencement in our own right, is a mere delusion. It is not by mistake that the trans\* literature references Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* so often: an undefinable and therefore dangerous creature which was born on the surgical table and has no past. A utopia that has no connection to the past is a vulnerable one. Stefánia Faludi created something valuable from her sex change, because through the sex change her daughter, Susan Faludi, could tell a story that denied her what she feared the most but, at the same time, was her sole refuge: oblivion.

## Note

1. A previous version of this review was published in Hungarian in *Reflektor*, 3 August 2016; at <http://reflektor.hu/velemenypeto-andrea-a-felejtetes-joga>