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**Camille Paglia: It’s Time for a New Map of the Gender World**

**written by**[**Claire Lehmann**](https://quillette.com/author/clairelehmann/)

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**I discovered Camille Paglia’s work when I was pursuing my undergraduate arts education at The University of Adelaide, South Australia, in the early 2000s. I was deeply disillusioned with the courses in my arts degree and their monomaniacal focus on social constructionism, and was looking for criticism of Michel Foucault on the internet. I stumbled across a 1991**[**op-ed**](https://www.nytimes.com/1991/05/05/books/ninnies-pedants-tyrants-and-other-academics.html)**written by Paglia for *The New York Times,* in which she described the followers of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault*,*as “fossilized reactionaries,” and “the perfect prophets for the weak, anxious academic personality.” I was hooked.**

**It wasn’t long before I discovered that my university’s library contained each of her books, including the essay collections *Vamps and Tramps*and *Sex, Art and American Culture.*For the final year of my arts degree, (before pursuing my studies in psychology) I spent the bulk of my time at the university reading Paglia in the library. She was like a revelation. Her work was subversive but erudite, and she synthesized insights made in the realm of the arts, ancient history and folk biology—something that no other scholar of the humanities had attempted to do. Thirteen years later, it is an honour to be able to interview Camille Paglia for *Quillette.***

**Paglia is an essayist, author, and professor of humanities at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where she has taught since 1984. She completed her PhD at Yale under the supervision of Harold Bloom, author of *The Western Canon.*Her first book,**[***Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence, from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson***](https://amzn.to/2T0yOSt)***,*was listed by David Bowie as one of “**[**100 books we should all read**](http://www.faena.com/aleph/articles/100-books-we-should-all-read-according-to-david-bowie/)**.”**

**Her other books include**[***Break, Blow, Burn***](https://amzn.to/2JUkpTG)**, a close-reading of 43 classic poems, and**[***Glittering Images: A Journey Through Art from Egypt to Star Wars***](https://amzn.to/2DBiByG)***.* In recent years, her essays have been collected and published in new editions, including**[***Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender and Feminism***](https://amzn.to/2DyjCHQ)**(February 2018) and**[***Provocations: Collected Essays on Art, Feminism, Politics, Sex and Education***](https://amzn.to/2T2Wrtx)**, which was released by Pantheon in October 2018.**

**I interviewed Paglia over email for *Quillette.*What follows is an unedited reproduction of that interview.**

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**Claire Lehmann: You seem to be one of the only scholars of the humanities who are willing to challenge the post-structuralist status quo. Why have other humanities academics been so spineless in preserving the integrity of their fields?**

**Camille Paglia:** The silence of the academic establishment about the corruption of Western universities by postmodernism and post-structuralism has been an absolute disgrace. First of all, the older generation of true scholars who still ruled the roost when I arrived at the Yale Graduate School in 1968 were not fighters, to begin with. American professors, unlike their British counterparts, had not been schooled in ferocious and satirical debate. They were courtly and genteel, a High Protestant middlebrow style. Voices were hushed, and propriety ruled at the Yale department of English: I once described it as “walking on eggs at the funeral home.”

An ossified New Criticism was then still ascendant. I had been trained in college in that technique of microscopic close analysis of the text, and it remains a marvelous tool for cultural criticism: I have applied it to everything from painting to pop songs. However, my strong view at the time (from my early grounding in archaeology) was that literary criticism had to recover authentic historical consciousness and also to expand toward psychology, which was still considered vulgar. Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman (whose Yale careers had begun amid tinges of anti-Semitism) were moving in a different, more conceptual direction, heavy on European philosophy.

By the early 1970s, when I was writing my doctoral dissertation (*Sexual Personae*, directed by Bloom), change suddenly arrived from outside: deconstruction was the hot new thing, hastened along by J. Hillis Miller, who left Johns Hopkins for Yale. I thought Derrida and DeMan and the rest of that crew were arrant nonsense from the start, a pedantic diversion from direct engagement with art. About the obsequious Yale welcome given to the pratlings of one continental “star” visitor, I acidly remarked to a fellow grad student sitting next to me, “They’re like high priests murmuring to each other.”

The New Criticism desperately needed supplementation, but that opaque hash (so divorced from genuine art appreciation) was certainly not it. I was disgusted at the rapid spread of deconstruction and post-structuralism throughout elite U.S. universities in the 1970s, when I was teaching at my first job at Bennington College. The reason it happened is really quite prosaic: a recession hit in the 1970s, and the job market in academe collapsed. Fancy-pants post-structuralism was the ticket to ride for ambitious, beady-eyed young careerists on the make. Its coy, showy gestures and clotted lingo were insiders’ badges of claimed intellectual superiority. But the whole lot of them were mediocrities from the start. It is doubtful that much if any of their work will have long-term traction.

As I argued in my long attack on post-structuralism, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf” (*Arion*, Spring 1991; reprinted in my first essay collection, [*Sex, Art, and American Culture*](https://amzn.to/2z5zayP)), Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault were already outmoded thinkers even in France, where their prominence had been relatively brief. There was nothing genuinely leftist in their elitist, monotonously language-based analysis. On the contrary, post-structuralism was abjectly reactionary, resisting and reversing the true revolution of the 1960s American counterculture, which liberated the senses and reconnected the body and personal identity to nature, in the Romantic manner. It is very telling that Foucault’s principal inspiration, by his own admission, was Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, which I loathed as a college student for its postwar passivity and nihilism. (As a teacher, I admire *Godot*as a play but still reject its parochial and at times juvenile world-view.)

Post-structuralism, along with identity politics, made huge gains in the 1970s, as the old guard professors proved helpless against a rising tide of rapid add-on programs and departments like women’s studies and African-American studies. The tenured professoriate seemed not to realize that change of some kind was necessary, and thus they failed to provide an alternative vision of a remodeled university of the future. I myself was lobbying for interdisciplinary innovation in the humanities—something that remained highly controversial right through the 1980s, when there were fierce battles over it where I was then teaching (during the merger of the Philadelphia College of Performing Arts with the Philadelphia College of Art to form the present University of the Arts). Another persistent proposal of mine has been for comparative religion to become the undergraduate core curriculum, an authentically global multiculturalism

Most established professors in the 1970s probably believed that the new theory trend was a fad that would blow away like autumn leaves. The greatness of the complex and continuous Western tradition seemed self-evident: the canon would surely stand, even if supplemented by new names. Well, guess what? Helped along by a swelling horde of officious, overpaid administrators, North American universities became, decade by decade, political correctness camps. Out went half the classics, as well as pedagogically useful survey courses demonstrating sequential patterns in history (now dismissed as a “false narrative” by callow theorists). Bookish, introverted old-school professors were not prepared for guerrilla warfare to defend basic scholarly principles or to withstand waves of defamation and harassment.

However, it is indeed difficult to understand why major professors already in safe, powerful positions avoided direct combat. For example, although he had made passing dismissive remarks about post-structuralism (“Foucault and soda water”), Harold Bloom never systematically engaged or critiqued the subject or used his access to the general media to endorse debate, which was left instead to self-identified conservatives. The latter situation was clearly counterproductive, insofar as it enabled the bourgeois faux leftists of academe to define themselves and their reflex gobbledygook as boldly progressive.

In October 1990, I sat with my longtime mentor Bloom at a presidential dinner preceding his Shakespeare lecture at Bryn Mawr College in the Philadelphia suburbs. I told him about the exposé of post-structuralism that I was writing for *Arion* (and that took six months to do). He flatly replied, “You’re wasting your time.” I must suppose there was simply a generational divide: as a product of the 1960s, I still passionately believe in reform as an ethical imperative. Furthermore, most of my teaching career has been spent at small art schools, which have always spurned the conformist formulas and protocols of traditional universities.

Nevertheless, the poisons of post-structuralism have now spread throughout academe and have done enormous damage to basic scholarly standards and disastrously undermined belief even in the possibility of knowledge. I suspect history will not be kind to the leading professors who appear to have put loyalty to friends and colleagues above defending scholarly values during a chaotic era of overt vandalism that has deprived several generations of students of a profound education in the humanities. The steady decline in humanities majors is an unmistakable signal that this once noble field has become a wasteland.



**Do you believe that politics and in particular social justice (i.e., anti-racism and feminism) are becoming cults or pseudo-religions? Is politics filling the void left by the receding influence of organized religion?**

**Paglia:** This has certainly been my view for many years now. I said in the introduction to my art book, [*Glittering Images*](https://amzn.to/2DBiByG) (2012), that secular humanism has failed. As an atheist, I have argued that if religion is erased, something must be put in its place. Belief systems are intrinsic to human intelligence and survival. They “frame” the flux of primary experience, which would otherwise flood the mind.

But politics cannot fill the gap. Society, with which Marxism is obsessed, is only a fragment of the totality of life. As I have written, Marxism has no metaphysics: it cannot even detect, much less comprehend, the enormity of the universe and the operations of nature. Those who invest all of their spiritual energies in politics will reap the whirlwind. The evidence is all around us—the paroxysms of inchoate, infantile rage suffered by those who have turned fallible politicians into saviors and devils, godlike avatars of Good versus Evil.

My substitute for religion is art, which I have expanded to include all of popular culture. But when art is reduced to politics, as has been programmatically done in academe for 40 years, its spiritual dimension is gone. It is coarsely reductive to claim that value in the history of art is always determined by the power plays of a self-referential social elite. I take Marxist social analysis seriously: Arnold Hauser’s Marxist, multi-volume [*A Social History of Art*](https://amzn.to/2SWukfL)(1951) was a major influence on me in graduate school. However, Hauser honored art and never condescended to it. A society that respects neither religion nor art cannot be called a civilization.

**The #MeToo movement seems to have many features of a moral panic, for example, there are exhortations to “believe all women” without relying on due process, and a great deal of weight is being placed on weak evidence, such as eyewitness testimony, and so forth. Would you agree that we are seeing a moral panic, the type of which has been depicted in Miller’s *The Crucible,*or Huxley’s *The Devils of Loudon*?**

**Paglia:** The headlong rush to judgment by so many well-educated, middle-class women in the #MeToo movement has been startling and dismaying. Their elevation of emotion and group solidarity over fact and logic has resurrected damaging stereotypes of women’s irrationality that were once used to deny us the vote. I found the blanket credulity given to women accusers during the recent U.S. Senate confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh positively unnerving: it was the first time since college that I truly understood the sexist design of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, whose mob of vengeful Furies is superseded by formal courts of law, where evidence is weighed.

I’m not sure that I would find “moral panic” in our recent glut of accusations and public histrionics. It is obviously a positive development that sexual abuse is no longer hidden or tolerated. In 1986, I developed moderate sexual harassment guidelines in my “Women and Sex Roles” class and presented them to the college administration for adoption. I am wholeheartedly in favor of women students or employees knowing their rights and speaking up to defend them. However, the #MeToo movement has gone seriously off track in encouraging uncorroborated accusations dating from ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. No democracy can survive in such a paranoid climate of ambush and summary execution. This is Stalinism, a nadir of politics.

What I see in both the Women’s March and #MeToo is an atavistic rediscovery by Western women of the joy of their own mutually nurturing solidarity—a primary feature of daily life during 10,000 years of the agrarian era that has been lost over the past two centuries of industrialization. As I have often noted, the sexes throughout human history actually had very little to do with each other. There was the world of men and the world of women, each with its own spheres of influence and activity. Women didn’t take men that seriously, and vice versa. I know this because I am the product of an immigrant family (my mother and all four grandparents were born in Italy), and it wasn’t that long ago that we were tilling the stony soil of the earthquake-prone motherland.

I am an equity feminist: that is, I demand equal opportunity for women through the removal of all barriers to their advance in the professional and political realms. However, I oppose special protections for women as inherently paternalistic and regressive. Women have rarely worked side by side with men in the way they now do in the modern workplace, whose competitive operational systems were devised by men for maximum productivity. Despite their general affluence, professional women of the Western world have been chronically unhappy for decades, and I conjecture that it is partly because they have been led to expect happiness from a mechanical work environment that doesn’t make men happy either.

Second, the nuclear family as a standard unit of social life is a relatively new and isolating phenomenon. Wives returning from work to an apartment or house are expecting their husbands to fulfill all the emotional and conversational needs that were once fulfilled by other women of multiple generations throughout the agrarian workday in the fields or at home (where the burdens of childcare and eldercare were group shared).

What I see spreading among professional middle-class women is a bitter resentment toward men that is in many cases unjust and misplaced. With divorce so easy since the sexual revolution, women find themselves competing with younger women in new and cruel ways. Agrarian women gained power as they aged: young women were brainless pawns whose marriages, pregnancies, childcare, cooking, and other chores were acerbically supervised and controlled by the dictatorial crones (forces of nature whom I fondly remember from childhood).

In short, #MeToo from a historical perspective is a *cri de coeur* from women who are realizing that the sexual revolution that many of us had once ecstatically embraced has in key ways devalued women, confused their private relationships, and complicated their smooth functioning in the workplace. It’s time for a new map of the gender world.

**Camille Paglia is the University Professor of Humanities and Media Studies at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Her eighth book,**[***Provocations: Collected Essays***](https://amzn.to/2qFBAji)**, was released by Pantheon in Oct. 2018.**

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