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Nancy Berns.
Framing the Victim: Domestic Violence, Media, and Social Problems.
Aldine de Gruyter, 2004, 194 pp.
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In *Framing the Victim* Nancy Berns draws on social problems theory as advanced in the work of Joel Best to explore how politics and media processes shape popular understandings and policy responses to domestic violence. The book builds upon two previous publications by Berns, a 1999 article on portrayals of domestic violence in women's magazines from 1970 through 1998, published in *Sociological Quarterly*, and a 2001 article on portrayals of this social problem in men's entertainment and political magazines during roughly the same time period, published in *Gender and Society*. In *Framing the Victim* she adds a third magazine data set, progressive political magazines. She supplements content analysis of domestic violence articles in these three magazine genres with a review of author guidelines, an examination of television daytime talk and entertainment news, and most valuably, interviews with magazine editors.

Berns identifies three media frames or filters on the social problem commonly named domestic violence in popular media: a victim empowerment frame, a women are equally or more violent antifeminist frame, and a social justice frame, which directs attention to cultural, structural and institutional level processes or causes. Her central argument is that occasional integration, overlap, and slippage notwithstanding, the dominant portrayal of domestic violence in popular media is of victims and of what they can or should do to end their toleration of abuse. This is to say, the voices that carry most weight, and that therefore constitute or construct the "official reality" of domestic violence for most people (especially those with no direct personal experience) simultaneously individualize the problem and blame the victim – in the case of women's magazines and televised media unwittingly, in the name of victim empowerment; and in the case of men's magazines intentionally, in the name of equality, truth, and fairness for men. Berns argues that these individualizing discourses effectively silence alternatives that seek to direct attention to abusers and the cultural, structural, and institutional forces that foster abuse. Variations and attempts at integration notwithstanding, the victim gets "framed."

Berns' major strength and contribution in this book is her discussion on how the victim frame achieved dominance in the 1990s in America. As she emphasizes, published media (and also clearly TV) involve and are produced through the actions and decisions of people who pursue interests consonant with advancing and/or denouncing various political goals, delivering audiences to advertisers, or simply catering to what Berns characterizes as a North American cultural obsession with entertainment and drama, and I would add personal efficacy. She notes that over the decade of the 1990s the victim movement was popularized as victim empowerment, power was redefined as personal choice, and an antifeminist focus on female perpetrators achieved prominence. During this decade, men's entertainment and political magazines emerged as vehicles for attacking not only feminist "orthodoxy" on domestic violence, but liberal causes generally. Pornography became, effectively, a subsidy for conservative politics. At the same time, moneyed interests began directing significant private subsidies to neo-conservative, traditional family, and feminist-denouncing endeavours. Together, backlash messages to men and victim empowering messages to women overshadowed and all but obliterated less visible and less available, less profitable, and less

subsidized progressive media.

As Berns's review of author guidelines and interviews with editors demonstrate, magazines and other popular media participate in politics by soliciting and selecting articles that fit with and advance explicit aims and missions. In the case of women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Glamour*, and *Teen*, prospective authors are encouraged to formulaically empower, personally involve, and uplift the reader. In the case of men's entertainment and political magazines such as *Penthouse*, *Playboy*, and *New Republic*, the formula is to debunk constructions of domestic violence that target men as perpetrators through "in your face" and "on the edge" re-framings of the problem as human violence that feminists have falsely framed and blamed on men. In contrast, progressive or alternative magazines such as *The Nation* and *The Progre*ssive solicit articles that critique mainstream media portrayals that either tolerate violence against women and children, or focus unduly on women's responsibility for ending abuse.

A key point, as Berns states, is that it is impossible to take politics out of media, whether mainstream or alternative. When a frame achieves dominance or hegemony in popular media it is therefore imperative to address how popular media are shaped by political interests and resources. This is to say, it is imperative to address whose interests drive the process. Unfortunately, though Berns provides data relevant to this question, she seems to lose the thread of her argument. A key question missed by Berns is the question of how it is that the interests of pornographers, the interests of traditional family advocates (assumedly the religious right), the interests of self-help gurus (Dr. Phil, Oprah), and the interests of big money came together to crowd out feminist and structural insights on the problem of domestic violence in American in the 1990s.

In her final chapter, rather than confront how progressive actors might counter the strange coalition of interests that emerges from her analysis, Berns proselytizes a "new" social problem. This new problem would focus not on victims but on "all violence" including "everyday violence" and "non-violent abuse." Berns suggests that this problem could be constructed through magazine articles that look in-depth at how people first start using abuse, at how they get away with it , and at how definitions of femininity and masculinity fuel abusive interactions. To this reader, this solution falls into the same individualizing trap that Berns so effectively critiques throughout her book. Indeed, Berns explicitly gives up on the social justice frame. She states that this construction has simply failed to receive social endorsement and that something new is therefore needed. In adopting this position Berns misses the opportunity to explore how it might be possible to harness the insights of her research to advance progressive social goals in the polarized polity that is America in the dawning decade of the twenty-first century. Fortunately, the richness and breadth of her data point the way for those who remain unwilling to surrender to the "right."

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Studies in Law Politics and Society, Volume 35, 2005, forthcoming). Mann is presently principle investigator in a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council study on youth violence and community-based efforts to address this problem under Canada's new Youth Criminal Justice Act.

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