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Being Feminist¹

INTRODUCTION

There is much to unpack in the proposition 'being feminist'. This article will attempt to illuminate what 'being feminist' means by addressing three, tightly interwoven, issues. First, and most fundamental, is the question: what is the 'woman' who is the subject of feminism? The second concerns the nature of feminism in its various guises. The third considers more explicitly feminism's uneasy relationship with identity politics. Beforehand, though, some ground-clearing is necessary.

My starting point is to make explicit the feminist identity from which I write. This is necessary for two, related, reasons. One is that it is common for feminist writers deliberately to weave personal experience in to academic texts so as to situate their own knowledge and to challenge 'masculine myths of neutrality that have characterised [theory's] truth claims'.² In addition, feminist authors tread a fine line between, on the one hand, speaking 'for' feminism and women as if they were undifferentiated categories to be represented as 'we' and, on the other, collapsing into a solipsistic 'I' that speaks only from personal experience. While this article is not about my

personal experience, my interpretation of feminism inevitably reflects my own position as a woman and a feminist.

I write as a white, heterosexual, middle class British woman whose feminism was forged during the 1970s. My feminist activism was channeled mainly through the Women's Liberation Campaign for Legal and Financial Independence.³ Campaigning involved many evenings and weekends producing leaflets and pamphlets to raise awareness of how the state reinforced married women's financial and legal dependence on their male partners through, for example, tax laws that denied them independent status and social security laws that provided discriminatory benefits. This work, together with the personal relationships that sustained the campaign group, helped to nurture my identity as a feminist.⁴ It is an identity that influenced my earlier work for the Child Poverty Action Group and my more recent trajectory as an academic, particularly in relation to the theorization of citizenship. It has also coloured my personal relationships and life choices.

As this implies, 'feminist' is a political identity that is rooted in a broad understanding of what constitutes 'the political'. It means that politics has implications for how we live our lives and for our personal relationships and it illuminates gendered power relationships and inequality in the private as well as the public sphere. 'The personal is political' was a rallying cry of 1970s feminism, often labeled 'second wave' to distinguish it from the feminist movement at the turn of the 20th century. For most of us, this was not an attempt to deny any sphere of privacy or personal life; rather it was about

exposing the way that public and private spheres intersect, typically to the advantage of men and disadvantage of women. And it was about interrogating who has the power to decide where the line is drawn. Indeed, it has been one of feminism's main political achievements to translate a number of issues previously deemed 'private', such as domestic violence and reproductive rights, into legitimate concerns of public policy. Writing today, Katherine Rake of the Fawcett Society sums it up: 'To me feminism is about who cleans the loo and how the state supports childcare; it is about who holds power in international conglomerations and who has control over the household budget; and it is about whether or not we have the structures to protect women from violence and whether they can live safe in their own homes'.⁵

Thus, for many women who claim feminism as an identity it is a political identity that does not recognize a rigid division between the public and the private. As such it is able to contribute to various other facets of feminist women's identity: their 'ontological' identity or unique sense of self; their collective 'categorical' identity as women and their 'relational' identity forged through their relationships with other feminists.⁶ This then raises the question of men's relationship to feminism and feminist identity.

Can men be feminist or can they simply show a welcome solidarity with their feminist sisters? Both sides of the argument are rehearsed in a helpful edited collection called Men Doing Feminism.⁷ The case against is put by David J. Kahane who describes male feminism as an 'oxymoron' and 'an identity rife

with contradictions'.⁸ He maintains that 'while it is important for men to take feminism seriously, recognize their own roles in sexist privilege and oppression, and work for change, men have to face the extent to which fighting patriarchy means fighting themselves'.⁹ He draws on Sandra Harding's work to argue that men cannot possess the feminist knowledge and understanding that women can derive from the 'standpoint' of their experience.

Harding herself, however, in the same volume contends that men can develop feminist subjectivities. She observes that a feminist standpoint 'does not just flow spontaneously from the conditions of women's existence' but 'has to be wrestled out against the hegemonic dominant ideologies that structure the practices of daily life as well as dominant forms of belief'.¹⁰ Men too can thus develop feminist knowledge from their own particular struggles. But can such knowledge forge a feminist identity? The editor, Tom Digby, believes it can. He claims that feminism is 'central to my intellectual and political identity' and that he considers it 'the most important defining characteristic of my philosophical and personal life'. He does, though, acknowledge that such a position is incomprehensible to those women for whom feminism is primarily a 'source of empowerment' rather than 'a sociopolitical stance which could be espoused or rejected by anyone, male or female'.¹¹ This perhaps suggests that it may indeed be possible for a man to 'do' feminism but that insofar as he can 'be' a feminist, the meaning of 'being' feminist is very different than it is for a woman who has experienced the sexist oppression and subordination that

the feminist movement strives to eradicate. The rest of this article, therefore, concentrates on women 'being feminist'.

THE 'WOMAN' IN FEMINISM

The first step in the discussion is to consider the ways in which feminist theory and politics have constructed the category 'woman' who is their subject. We can identify three main archetypes: the woman who is or who should be equal to a man on the basis of what they have in common; the woman who is different from a man; and the deconstructed woman (or man) who disappears in a myriad of multiple subject positions. Translated into feminist approaches, they can be identified by the labels 'equality', 'difference' and 'diversity'.¹²

Until recently, the two dominant models were those of equality and difference. Under the former, women have been identified as rational human beings with the same capacities for citizenship as men and therefore entitled to the same rights. Any pertinent gender differences that exist are attributed to the effects of sexist attitudes and institutions. The term 'gender' was adopted to distinguish between such socially constructed differences and those 'natural' differences that are attributed to biological sex. Under the difference model, women's distinct qualities have been emphasized and celebrated. These are typically characterized as: caring, intuitive, emotionally literate, peace-loving. In stronger formulations, they are understood as essential qualities of women as a sex; in weaker versions, as derived from the gendered caring responsibilities they still tend to fulfil. The history of feminism can be analyzed from the perspective of the interplay between and relative ascendancy of the

two models at different times and in different countries. Anglo-American second-wave feminism is frequently characterized in terms of a shift from the initially dominant claims for women's equality to a stronger affirmation of women's difference, although, as we shall see, this formulation does not adequately capture the politics of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) of the late 1960s and 1970s.

While the equality-difference framework continues to help make sense of debates within feminism, a number of feminist theorists have critiqued the dichotomous construction of equality and difference as creating a theoretical and political cul-de-sac.¹³ Both sides of the dichotomy have been framed with reference to men as the yardstick: 'When men and women are treated the same, it means women being treated as if they were men; when men and women are treated differently, the man remains the norm, against which the woman is peculiar, lacking, different'.¹⁴ Moreover, the opposite of equality is inequality not difference; the goal is to achieve equality while acknowledging women and men's different subject positions and needs.

A key move in challenging the equality-difference dichotomy was the exposure of the ways in which it suppresses the differences within the categories of woman and man. This brings us to the third, deconstructed, model of woman. This model achieved dominance in the later stages of second-wave feminism as a result of two main developments. One was the theoretical advance of post-structuralism, which, with its deconstruction of all such binary oppositions in face of the multiple and fluid identities that make up

each individual, undermined the very notion of 'woman'.¹⁵ This move threatened feminism with the loss of its subject. Nevertheless, even those such as Denise Riley, who in their theoretical challenge to such categories in effect deconstructed 'women' out of existence, acknowledged the necessity of 'a politics of "as if they existed"'.¹⁶ What was no longer acceptable was to act 'as if they existed' separate from other sources of diversity that intersected with gender. The idea of multiple intersectionality was propounded as a way of avoiding the fragmentation threatened by diversity. It focuses on the inter-relationships between different social divisions – as either reinforcing or counteracting each other. Where sources of oppression intersect – as in the case of a black, disabled woman – the implications for her subject position and identity are better understood as multiplicative rather than additive.

Feminism also faced a direct political, as well as a theoretical, challenge from those groups of women whose identities and interests had been ignored, marginalized or subsumed under the figure of the equal or different woman who was its subject. Black feminists took the lead in exposing the white prism through which white feminists represented 'woman' and the privilege that whiteness bestowed upon them. Lesbian feminists and disabled feminists likewise challenged the conventional monolithic construction of womanhood within feminism, while class and age differences between women were also highlighted. The repercussions for the feminist movement of the 1970s were seismic.

FEMINISM(S)

Institutional and political context helped to shape the complexion of the feminist movements that emerged in different countries. In this section, I focus mainly on Britain, paying particular attention to the second wave feminism of the late 1960s/1970s and to what some term the third wave feminism of the turn of the 21st century. I shall use the contrast to argue that the experience of and identity associated with 'being feminist' have changed significantly within the space of just 30 years.

As the discussion of the 'woman' in feminism illustrated, it is more appropriate to talk about 'feminisms' in the plural than a singular 'feminism' to which all those who identify themselves as feminists sign up. This means that definitions of feminism tend to be couched in general terms such as an overriding concern with the ways in which women are disadvantaged relative to men. The diverse strands of feminism deploy a variety of discourses such as 'inequality', 'discrimination', 'oppression' and 'subordination' to characterize the nature of this disadvantage. They also locate the sources of women's disadvantage in different institutions (for instance, of patriarchy or capitalism) and at different levels (such as the state, labour market or family and personal relationships), with implications for the target of their political action.

This is best exemplified in the three-part classification that is typically made of second-wave feminism: liberal, Marxist or socialist, and radical.¹⁷ Liberal feminism located the source of women's disadvantage in state policies as well as individual prejudice but saw the state as an essentially neutral institution that need not serve the interests of any particular group. Liberal feminists

campaigned for equal rights of citizenship and for the end of discrimination, particularly in the labour market. Marxist/socialist and radical feminism, by contrast, identified the state as representing capitalist and patriarchal interests respectively. Marxist/socialist feminists attributed women's oppression to capitalism and focused on women's economic exploitation in both the workplace and the family within the framework of a class as well as gender analysis.

Radical feminism identified male power or patriarchy as the source of female subordination. This necessitated political change at the level of personal relationships and the family, particularly around issues of sexuality and male violence. Although the debates were sometimes fierce and the divisions bitter, notably between socialist and radical feminists, there were some areas of overlap. Some socialist-feminists, for instance, explored gender identities and family relations using psychoanalytic theory, and some radical feminists engaged with the patriarchal state in order to effect political change.

What Marxist/socialist and radical feminism shared above all else (by contrast with liberal feminism) was a belief in the need to change the system rather than accommodate women within it. It was a transformative politics that sought fundamental change at every level; hence the 'liberation' for which the 1970s WLM fought. As such, it was a child of its times – embodying the spirit of the radical politics of the late 1960s and at the same time challenging the sexism of much of that politics. Two quotations capture the mood of the WLM:

Because the Women's Movement analyses and questions the very fundamentals of human experience – the division of labour between the sexes, the tenets of 'masculinity' and 'femininity', the sexual objectification of women, the exclusion of women, children and old people from the 'real' world, the Protestant work ethic, the distribution of wealth, the separation of men from emotionality and women from rationality, the competitive and individualistic morality which divides people from each other while propping up a capitalist economy, and the oppressive nature of a society divided by class, sex and race – the Movement, unlike any before it, confronts both the minutiae and the totality of human experience...the totality of oppression.¹⁸

Women's Liberation in its heyday was a theory and practice of social transformation: full of all the embroiled and messy actions, hostilities and compromises of collective political engagement. For the most part, it manoeuvred within a broader culture of the left: refusing to separate women off from wider struggles against inequality and subordination, but fighting the perpetual marginalization or neglect of what were often women's most specific interests and concerns. It endlessly debated questions of priorities, organization and alliances in the attempt to enrich women's lives and connect with other radical projects (heatedly discussing the varied – often opposed – interests of different groups of women, especially the most vulnerable). In the process, it transformed the very concept of the "political", giving women a central place within it.¹⁹

30 years on, it is difficult to convey the exhilaration of such a politics. Coming together as women in innovative forms of direct political action, charged meetings and intense consciousness-raising groups (which attempted to forge a political understanding of individual experience and support personal change) was in itself a transformative (and sometimes painful) experience, even if we did not achieve the transformation of the world many were seeking. (It was, after all, always a minority politics.)

The passions aroused, however, meant that the differences between feminists proved too powerful to be accommodated within a single unified movement. As observed earlier, black feminists threw down a fundamental challenge to a

movement that marginalized them and their interests. The divisions over 'race' came to a head in the 1980s, with the emergence of the black women's movement. In the mean time, the conflicts between radical and socialist feminists, in particular over the significance of heterosexuality and male violence as causes of women's oppression, led to the implosion of the WLM in a final bitter national conference in 1978.

The following year, Margaret Thatcher was voted in to power and feminism faced a very different political climate. Campaigns continued but they were more fragmented and it was difficult to maintain momentum as Thatcherism tightened its grip. Some feminists sought refuge in municipal politics, where a number of Labour local authorities followed the lead of the Greater London Council and established women's or equality committees. This trend reflected a more general tendency among feminists to become involved in labour movement politics and a greater willingness to engage directly with the state from what was now a more defensive stance, typical of campaigning groups faced by a radical new-right government. Feminists continued to work as individuals within the mainstream or in small groups outside it during the 1980s and early 1990s, but in the absence of an organized movement, their influence was not always visible.

Post-feminism?

The early 1990s was the period in which some feminists, notably the American, Susan Faludi, identified a 'backlash' from politicians and the media who blamed many of society's ills on changes achieved by feminism.²⁰ The

thesis originated in the US, with the ascendancy of the New Right, the neo-conservative element of which was committed to restoring traditional family values and reversing abortion rights. However, Faludi's attempt to apply it to the UK met with a mixed response. Many British feminists felt that it painted too simplistic and negative a picture of the reality of women's position. Nevertheless, even if British feminism has not experienced an explicit backlash as such, it has become common in recent years to describe this as a 'post-feminist' era.

Post-feminism manifests itself through both popular culture and politics. Michèle Barrett describes its cultural expression as 'a popular feeling that a drearily militant feminist politics has been succeeded by a new phenomenon – we can shorthand it as “girl power” – which puts the femininity back into women's sense of identity and aspiration'.²¹ For Angela McRobbie, the phenomenon is personified in *Bridget Jones's Diary*.²² Politically, the implication of applying the label 'post' to feminism is that the movement has achieved its goals and is no longer necessary or relevant, for women now 'have it all'; to suggest otherwise is to cling to yesterday's politics.

This position creates a dilemma for feminists. On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge the very real gains that have been made in all spheres. For instance, many of the legal rights for which we fought in the 1970s have been won and women have a much stronger presence in higher and further education, the labour market and the political system. To discount the significance of such changes is to discount women's political achievements

and to encourage a culture of victim-hood and defeatism. On the other hand, women worldwide continue to face systematic disadvantage in both public and private spheres. Moreover, not all women have benefited to the same extent from the advances that have been made, with class and educational differences between women in particular becoming more marked.

Overall, the gendered domestic division of labour and time is still skewed firmly in men's favour, so that women enter the public spheres of the labour market and the polis with one hand tied behind their back. In the labour market, occupational segregation, greater concentration in part-time work and the gender pay gap mean that women remain more likely than men to be low-paid. In the UK the average hourly pay of a part-time female worker is still only two-fifths of that of a male full-time worker, which is similar to 25 years ago. In most countries, women are more likely than men to be poor and they carry the main burden of managing poverty. Domestic violence stunts the lives of many women. A glass ceiling still governs differential gendered access to top jobs and public positions. With very few exceptions, women are under-represented in parliaments and governments. The litany of gender injustice continues.

Whether one reads women's cup as half-full or half-empty, what is clear is that it is 'nonsense to suggest that we are living in a post-feminist world in which issues of gender inequality have been comfortably resolved'.²³ What then is the state of feminism at the turn of the 21st century? In answering this question, it is helpful to follow Patricia Hewitt in making a distinction between

big 'F' and small 'f' feminism. Hewitt's view is that whereas the former, with its explicit claim to the 'F' word as espoused by second-wave feminists, 'seems to have little resonance today', the latter 'seems to be alive and well'.²⁴ She sees it in her own government which has established a Women's (now Women and Equality) Unit and pursues various policies to improve the position of particular groups of women but which deliberately eschews the 'F' word. It is 'a politics for women without feminism'.²⁵ More generally, 'there is a wide range of constituencies including researchers, policy-makers and campaigners who do not use the term "feminist" at all but are using concepts such as gender and/or ideas from feminism in their approach to a wide variety of issues...This is partly because such ideas have become part of general currency'.²⁶ We face the paradox that the very diffusion into the mainstream of many of the tenets of big 'F' feminism, as translated into small 'f' feminism, has marked feminism's eclipse as a political movement. Small 'f' feminism may be 'on the inside', as Natasha Walter²⁷ claims, but big 'F' feminism is out in the cold.

One exception is in the academy where (even though women as a group are still disadvantaged) feminist scholarship has thrived in recent years. Indeed, some argue that feminism's retreat to the academy (all too often pursuing highly abstract and opaque theorizing) and academic feminism's 'cultural turn' towards a preoccupation with language and representation away from the materialist, socioeconomic domain contributed to its demise as a vibrant politics. Nevertheless, as Stevi Jackson points out, 'many feminists resisted the seductions of the cultural turn [and] others are beginning to find a way

back to materialism'.²⁸ Moreover, some feminist scholars (cultural as well as material) continued to traverse the theory-action divide and to pursue a feminist praxis. As ever, feminism reflected on itself, holding both its theory and practice to critical account. Such reflections prompted Judith Stacey to comment that 'closer attention to the diverse sources and character of flourishing non-western feminist practice and thought might do more to revitalize western feminist theory than the most rigorously reflexive meta-theoretical ruminations on our own intellectual practices'.²⁹

Global sisterhood?

The significance of 'non-western' feminism does not, however lie in its ability to 'revitalize western feminist theory'. Instead, according to M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'it provides a position from which to argue for a comparative, relational feminist praxis that is transnational in its response to and engagement with global processes of colonization'.³⁰ They and other third world and postcolonial feminists threw down a challenge to western white feminists that mirrored that of western black feminists, discussed above. Claims to 'global sisterhood' were rejected as premised on a universal, western-constructed 'woman', whose oppression was interpreted through (white) western eyes.³¹ Instead of an international women's movement, which assumes global sisterhood, Mohanty makes the case for international networks or coalitions between indigenous feminist groups organized around specific issues.³²

An example might be the international coalition that has campaigned for 'women's rights as human rights', which some see as a key development in feminist politics.³³ Through networking at local, national and international levels, the movement has, according to Charlotte Bunch, 'developed a model that affirms the universality of human rights while respecting the diversity of particular experiences'. This action has reflected a belief in 'building links among women committed to a common vision of rights but diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual orientation, culture and geography'.³⁴ Such a model is consistent with developments in feminist thinking about identity politics, discussed below.

An emergent issue, which highlights the global socio-economic divisions between women, is that of 'global care chains'. These link more affluent women in the global North with poorer women of the South who migrate in order to care for the former's children, leaving their own children at home to be cared for by others. But, as Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild observe, the chain 'does not bring them together in the way that second-wave feminists in affluent countries once liked to imagine—as sisters and allies struggling to achieve common goals. Instead, they come together as mistress and maid, employer and employee, across a great divide of privilege and opportunity'.³⁵

A third wave?

Not only was second wave western feminism forced to acknowledge that sisterhood is not global, it has also had to face the limits of any claim to

sisterhood with the next generation of women. Returning to the British context, McRobbie has suggested that it is not surprising that younger women would want to distance themselves from their feminist mothers and teachers and from the battles they fought (often before they were even born).³⁶ However, she fears that what she initially read as ambivalence may have 'consolidated into something closer to repudiation'.³⁷ Expressions of antipathy towards feminism are fairly common among young women (and also more widely). It is seen as anti-men, anti-feminine, anti-family, over-prescriptive, interfering in private lives, humourless, dowdy and puritanical: a source of oppression rather than of liberation. Who would want to identify themselves in such terms?

Nevertheless, not all younger women reject the F label. The term 'third wave' or 'new' feminism has been coined to differentiate the popular feminism promulgated by some younger women over the past decade from that of the second wave. For some second wave feminists, the politics of third wave feminism, caricatured by Barrett as "girl power" applied to grown women',³⁸ smacks too much of post-feminism. Others have welcomed the willingness of some younger women to claim the F word and have responded positively to their optimistic, more popular messages. These are often articulated through journalistic writings that operate under different conventions to some of the more academic works of the second wave.

Although third wave feminists do not speak with a single voice, these messages celebrate women's power, femininity and sexuality in particular.

The American, Naomi Wolf, led the way with the exhortation to embrace 'power feminism', based on 'a psychology of female power', in place of a 'victim' feminism which 'seeks power through an identity of powerlessness'.³⁹ The 'genderquake', which she identifies, 'demands that women begin to see themselves as potential agents of change with many resources rather than as helpless victims'.⁴⁰ 'Power feminism' she claims 'encourages us to identify with one another primarily through the shared pleasures and strengths of femaleness, rather than primarily through our shared vulnerability and pain'; it 'is unapologetically sexual'.⁴¹ Five years later, the British journalist, Natasha Walter, expounded a similar message, although she distances herself from Wolf's psychological focus and places greater emphasis on the continued need for socio-economic change. 'The new feminism', which she articulates, is 'a celebratory and optimistic movement' that applauds women's success, personified in the figure of Margaret Thatcher. It is less preoccupied with personal behaviour than was second-wave feminism, unpicking 'the tight link that feminism in the seventies made between our personal and political lives' and casting off a 'tendency towards puritanism and political correctness' especially in 'the area of female sexuality'.⁴²

Some elements of third wave feminism were, in fact, not as distant from second wave feminism as the proponents of both sometimes like to make out. Many second wave feminist writers, notably black and third world feminists, were already warning of the dangers of the identification of women as passive, injured victims without agency. (Although they were less individualistic in their analysis and prescriptions and more careful than Wolf to

emphasize the structural constraints women still face). More troubling for some has been third wave feminism's inability to offer younger women a politics that helps them deal with the hyper-sexualization of everyday culture and 'the respectabilisation of pornography and sex entertainment'.⁴³

The relationship between paid work and care – currently high on the feminist political agenda - is another issue where the differences between second and third wave feminism are narrower than they sometimes appear. Mainstream feminist politics has been undergoing one of its perennial pendulum swings.⁴⁴ In place of the emphasis placed in the late 20th century on fighting for women's equality as independent citizens in the workplace, we are seeing an assertion of the importance of care as a responsibility of citizenship. This represents a reaction against a number of developments including: New Labour's fetishism of the paid work ethic; a long hours culture that makes the workplace a hostile environment for those (still mainly women) trying to balance paid work and care responsibilities; and a 'care' deficit that has opened up in Western welfare states, as traditional unpaid care-providers have entered the labour market. At issue is, in part, how women's identity revolves around motherhood, care and paid work and also the nature and extent of men's contribution as fathers.

The skewed paid work-care relationship is the theme not only of much third wave feminist journalism but also of second wave feminist academic writing that has been promoting an 'ethic of care' as a governing principle of social policy. Although it does represent something of a pendulum swing against

equality politics, it also echoes some of the concerns of the WLM. Back in 1982, for instance, Anna Coote and Beatrix Campbell balanced their demands for equality in the workplace with questions about how society can best provide for the care of children and about the relationship between working hours and 'male absenteeism from child care and other domestic responsibilities'.⁴⁵

Thus, continuities between second and third wave feminism exist alongside very real differences in content and style. As suggested already, a marked contrast is the lack today of a collective, big 'F' feminist movement committed to the kind of transformative politics that fuelled the WLM. One consequence is that personal troubles are more likely to be interpreted as requiring individual rather than socio-political solutions. Another is that those young women who do identify themselves as feminists lack the kind of collective support and voice that young feminists enjoyed in the 1970s.

This has prompted the establishment by young feminists of 'the F-Word'. This is a webzine designed 'to help encourage a new sense of community among UK feminists, and to show the doubters that feminism still exists here, today, now – and is as relevant to the lives of the younger generation as it was to those in the 60s and 70s'.⁴⁶ What a number of contributors emphasize, though, is that they are 'doing feminism in a different way to our foremothers. We are not younger versions of the women who marched in the 60s and 70s because our conceptions of feminism and equality are shaped by our different experiences and lives'.⁴⁷ Reading some of the entries, I am nevertheless

struck by the sense of loss and isolation expressed by some of the young women. This is exemplified by an anonymous e.mail sent to the F-Word in 2002: 'I have been again hit so forcefully with this "I wish I lived in the 70s" feeling. Young feminists today lack the experience of sisterhood. We no longer know each other. There are no "consciousness raising" groups. There are no marches or campaigns, at least as far as I'm aware – and how would you find them anyway?'⁴⁸

THE RISE AND FALL OF FEMINIST IDENTITY POLITICS

'The experience of sisterhood', the lack of which this young woman laments, was the glue that first held together the identity politics associated with feminism and that then came unstuck in the face of the challenge to the category woman/sister discussed above. A woman does not simply 'be feminist'; she first 'becomes feminist'. This involves a double-layered process of identity formation: as a woman and as a feminist. The latter does not automatically follow from the former but is closely related to it and once established a feminist identity can reinforce and colour one's identity as a woman.

The rise and fall of feminist identity politics has involved a double trajectory. One was the path from the exhilarating eruption of feminist collective identity among those involved in the WLM to the less public and more individualized manifestation of feminist identity today, traced in the previous section. Lynne Segal recalls the 'amazing levels of energy, excitement and pleasure' as women collectively found 'a voice to assert our own passionate determination

to break through the devaluation of women we had felt and witnessed all our lives...Few things are more uplifting than the strengthening of identity, coherence and purpose which collective struggle and action can at times create'.⁴⁹ But, she goes on to observe, the heady passion of the early days of a political movement, when all seems possible, does not last. Moreover, the collective feminist identity experienced by some women as life-transforming, inclusive sisterhood was experienced by others as narrow, exclusionary and stifling. This is one of the criticisms made by third wave feminists. Wolf, in particular, advocates an individualized rather than collective feminist identity. 'Power feminism', she explains, 'encourages a woman to claim her individual voice rather than merging her voice in a collective identity'.⁵⁰ The demise of big 'F' feminism and the more general weakening of collective politics in the face of growing individualization (with its emphasis on individual choice and self-help) make it difficult today for any self-avowed feminists who do want to merge their voice in a collective identity.

The second trajectory was that associated with the changing construction of woman, discussed in the first section. This led to a rejection of identity politics in favour of coalition-building forms of politics that appealed to notions of solidarity. In the phase when woman was constructed as equal to man, feminist politics was about the pursuit of equal rights rather than the articulation of different identities, the aim being to 'transcend one's female specificity not emphasise it'.⁵¹ The assertion of woman's difference, by contrast, inspired a politics which was grounded in the specificity of female identity and experience and which made claims to speak and be heard as

women. This gave way to a more explicitly defined 'identity politics' associated with the challenge to the single category 'woman'. This can be understood, Judith Squires suggests:

as a pluralized form of a difference perspective...identity politics movements adopted the same general approach to cultural differences per se that the difference perspective adopted with respect to gender alone; they extended the difference analysis to a wider range of cultural differences, meaning that the gender issue no longer held the centrality that its advocates once claimed.⁵²

The consequent proliferation of politicized identities gave rise to divisions and fragmentation that, in turn, led many feminist activists and theorists to repudiate identity politics. They contend that identity politics represents a dead end for feminism because it reifies and freezes group identities and creates fixed boundaries between them, thereby closing off the possibility of wider solidarities. The Catch-22 created by an identity politics that reifies differences is summed up by Razia Aziz: that the very assertion of differences tends to create 'fixed and oppositional categories which can result in another version of the suppression of difference'.⁵³

Another argument, associated in particular with Nancy Fraser, is that a cultural politics of identity, rooted in claims for recognition of difference, has become disconnected from an egalitarian politics of justice and redistribution.⁵⁴ She makes the case for disconnecting a politics of recognition from identity on the grounds that what is at issue is not group identity but the status subordination of individual group members that impedes parity of participation in social life. This formulation, she claims, both avoids

the essentializing dangers of identity politics and 'facilitates the integration of claims for recognition with claims for the redistribution of resources and wealth', which is crucial to the achievement of gender justice.⁵⁵

Fraser's approach is different from, though consistent with, attempts by a number of feminist theorists to construct various versions of what might be described as 'a politics of solidarity in difference'.⁵⁶ The impetus has come in particular, though not only, from black feminists. Bell hooks, for instance, claims that rather than suppress differences in the name of sisterhood, 'we can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity'.⁵⁷ Using the work of hooks, Jodie Dean has developed the concept of 'a reflective feminist solidarity as an alternative to identity politics. It is based on the idea that our disagreements and arguments can bring us together rather than tear us apart'.⁵⁸ She presents the idea 'as that openness to difference which lets our disagreements provide the basis for connection'.⁵⁹

A similar philosophy underpins the notion of 'transversal politics'. Drawing on the work of a group of Italian feminists, Nira Yuval-Davis describes this political strategy as a process of 'rooting' and 'shifting', in which participants remain rooted in their own identities and values but at the same time are willing to shift views in dialogue with those with other identities and values.⁶⁰ It represents a democratic process that 'can on the one hand look for commonalities without being arrogantly universalist, and on the other affirm

difference without being transfixated by it'.⁶¹ It explicitly attempts to avoid the fragmentation of identity politics by working through differences to achieve common goals. As Yuval-Davis and other proponents of transversal politics acknowledge, the difficulties in practice are not to be underestimated. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to examples where such a feminist politics has been attempted, although not necessarily always bearing the explicit badge of feminism.

In the UK, Southall Black Sisters (SBS) is an example of an explicitly feminist group that pursues a politics of alliance rather than identity in a way that is consistent with transversal politics. SBS is a collective of South Asian women that undertakes advice and campaigning work, particularly in the area of domestic and sexual violence. Pragna Patel, one of its members, reflects that its history can be understood as having been about 'resisting imposed identities' and 'the juggling of different identities'. She asserts that 'we must be involved in alliance-building if our aim is to work towards a more egalitarian society. And the identities we choose can either limit or increase the potential for the alliance-building'.⁶²

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, established to ensure women's presence in the Northern Ireland peace process, illustrates the principles of transversal politics, although it is not a big 'F' feminist grouping. Through a process of dialogue, the Coalition has provided a space in which different identities can be named and different voices heard. 'Respect for diversity...as well as a concern for justice, equity, open-ended inclusive dialogue,

accommodation and workable solutions' have been key to an emergent 'solidarity whereby a pluralist politics of participation is being created'.⁶³ In a statement, which captures something of the essence of transversal politics, the Coalition reflects that 'we have found that you learn more if you stand in other people's shoes. Our principles of inclusion, equality and human rights help us to do that'.⁶⁴

Similarly using the example of women's projects in Northern Ireland as well as in Bosnia and Israel, Cynthia Cockburn has attempted to analyze 'the doing of' transversal politics in conflict situations.⁶⁵ Her description of the work of Belfast women's centres illustrates transversal politics in action: 'Individually women held on to their political identities – some long for a united Ireland, others feel deeply threatened by the idea. But they have identified a commonality in being women, being community based and being angry at injustice and inequality, that allows them to affirm and even welcome this and other kinds of difference'.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

I draw two main conclusions from this overview of feminism and identity politics. First, there is no one way of 'being feminist'. My account is very much from a British perspective. The view may look very different from other parts of the world, or even other parts of the continent of Europe. The face of feminism also changes with time. We can perhaps talk of a life-course or life-courses of feminism. These flow through political time as feminism is interpreted and lived by women of different ages and different generations.

The experience of 'being feminist' is very different for a young woman today, in the absence of a self-styled big 'F' movement, than it was for me whose feminism came of age in the 1970s WLM. At the same time, 'being feminist' is very different for me today than it was then, as I live through political and personal change. Intersecting with the life-course of feminism are the differences that contributed to the break-up of the WLM: the challenge to the monolithic construct of woman. Black women, lesbian women, disabled women have each asserted their own ways of 'being feminist'.

This leads to the second conclusion: that identity politics, while a critical stage in its evolution, has proved a dead-end for feminism. As a consequence, some of the most creative feminist theorists and activists have developed ways of thinking and doing that move us beyond identity politics to various forms of a politics of solidarity in difference.

¹ The author would like to thank the series editor, Richard Bellamy, and also Valerie Bryson, Jim Kincaid and Angela McRobbie for their helpful comments on the first draft.

² Jackie Stacey, 'Feminist theory: Capital F, Capital T', in Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson (eds.) *Introducing Women's Studies*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, p. 64.

³ The British Women's Liberation Movement adopted six demands, the fifth of which was for legal and financial independence.

⁴ When we finally disbanded, exhausted from the hard work of campaigning, I joined some other women in a women's group that met regularly to talk about political and personal issues. The group was an anchor in our lives and we still meet for reunion dinners when we debate the personal and the political as animatedly as ever.

⁵ K. Rake, 'Winning against men or changing the rules?' *Renewal*, 12 (3), 2004, p. 11.

⁶ The distinction between 'ontological' and 'categorical' identity is made by David Taylor, 'Social identity and social policy', *Journal of Social Policy* 27 (3), 1998: 329-350; the addition of 'relational' identity is taken from Fiona Williams, A Conceptual Chart for CAVA, 2000. www.leeds.ac.uk/cava/paper16fiona.htm and Shona Hunter, 'A critical analysis of approaches to the concept of social identity in social policy', *Critical Social Policy* 23 (3), 2003: 322-344.

⁷ Tom Digby (ed.) *Men Doing Feminism*, New York/London: Routledge, 1998.

⁸ D. J. Kahane, 'Male feminism as oxymoron' in T. Digby, op. cit.: 231.

⁹ *ibid.*, p213.

¹⁰ S. Harding, 'Can men be subjects of feminist thought?' in T. Digby, op. cit.

¹¹ T. Digby, 'Introduction' in T. Digby, op. cit.: 3, 5, 1.

¹² Judith Squires, 'Representing groups, deconstructing identities', *Feminist Theory*, 2 (1), 2001: 7-27.

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- ¹³ For a discussion see, R. Lister, Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives (2nd edn), Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003, Ch. 4.
- ¹⁴ Anne Phillips, Democracy and Difference, 1993: 45.
- ¹⁵ It also challenged the sex-gender distinction on the grounds that the biological and the social cannot be separated in this way for sex, as well as gender, is not 'natural' but socially constructed.
- ¹⁶ D. Riley, Am I that Name?, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988
- ¹⁷ Women were constructed as equal to men under liberal and Marxist/Socialist feminism and as different from them by radical feminists. For an account of the different strands of feminism, see V. Bryson, Feminist Political Theory. An Introduction, 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003.
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- ¹⁹ Lynne Segal, Why Feminism? Cambridge: Polity, 1999: 15-16, emphasis in original.
- ²⁰ S. Faludi, Backlash. London: Vintage, 1992.
- ²¹ M. Barrett, 'Post-feminism' in G. Browing, A. Halcli and F. Webster (eds.) Understanding Contemporary Society, London: Sage, 2000, p46.
- ²² A. McRobbie, 'Post-feminism and popular culture', Feminist Media Studies, 4 (3), 2004, pp4-20.
- ²³ Valerie Bryson, Feminist Debates, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999, p. 5.
- ²⁴ Hewitt is UK Minister for Women and Trade and Industry Secretary. She was speaking at a round-table discussion, 'Debating feminism: what do we make of the "F" word now?', Renewal, 12 (2), 2004, pp15-16.
- ²⁵ Angela McRobbie, 'Feminism and the third way', Feminist Review, 64, Spring 2000, p. 99.
- ²⁶ Brid Featherstone, Family Life and Family Support. A Feminist Analysis, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004, p. 42.
- ²⁷ N. Walter, The New Feminism, London: Little Brown, 1998, p.33
- ²⁸ S. Jackson, 'Why a materialist feminism is (still) possible--and necessary', Women's Studies International Forum, 24 (3/4), p286.
- ²⁹ J. Stacey, 'The empress of feminist Theory is overdressed'. Feminist Theory, 2 (1), 2001, p101.
- ³⁰ M. J. Alexander and C. T. Mohanty 'Introduction: Genealogies, legacies, movements' in M. J. Alexander and C. T. Mohanty (eds.) Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures, New York & London: Routledge, 1997.
- ³¹ In a very different context, Eastern European women have also sometimes been resistant to the claims of western feminism.
- ³² C. Mohanty 'Feminist encounters' in M. Barrett and A. Phillips, Destabilizing Theory. Contemporary Feminist Debates, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.
- ³³ See, Sylvia Walby, 'Feminism in a global era', Economy and Society, 31 (4), 2002, pp. 533-557. However, not all feminists would sign up to the notion of universal human rights.
- ³⁴ C. Bunch with P. Antrobus, S. Frost and N. Reilly 'International networking for women's human rights' in M. Edwards and J. Gaventa (eds.) Global Citizen Action, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001, pp. 228, 227.
- ³⁵ B. Ehrenreich and A. R. Hochschild 'Introduction' in B. Ehrenreich and A. R. Hochschild (eds.) Global Woman, London: Granta Books, 2003.
- ³⁶ A. McRobbie, Feminism and Youth Culture, 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.
- ³⁷ op. cit. 2004.
- ³⁸ op. cit., 2000, p. 48.
- ³⁹ N. Wolf, Fire With Fire, The New Female Power And How It Will Change the 21st Century. London; Chatto & Windus, 1993, pp. xvi & 147.
- ⁴⁰ ibid. p. 57
- ⁴¹ ibid. pp. 58 & 149.
- ⁴² N. Walter, op. cit. pp. 4 & 76.
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- ⁵⁵ ibid., p. 33 and N. Fraser, 'Rethinking recognition' in B. Hobson (ed.) Recognition Struggles and Social Movements. Contested Identities, Agency and Power, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
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