

Post-feminism and new feminisms

Angela McRobbie and Sara Ahmed



Angela McRobbie

<http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2013/06/angela-mcrobbe-on-the-illusion-of-equality-for-women/>

Cultural Studies

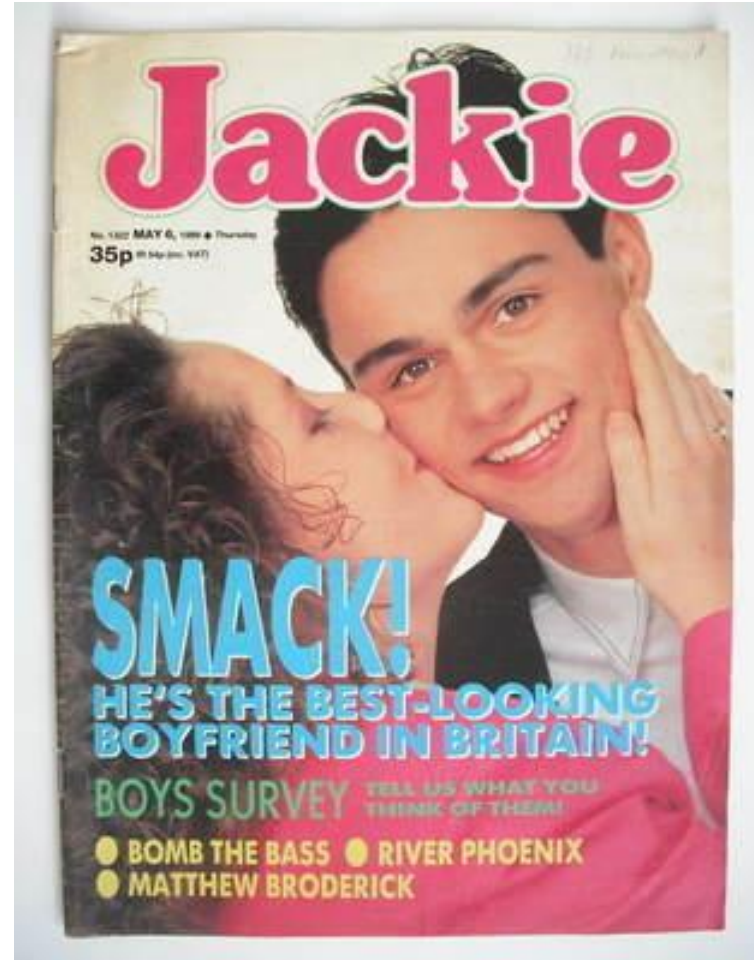
Studied with Stuart Hall in CCCS (Birmingham):
one of key figures in British cultural studies ->
now at Goldsmith college

Importance of feminism for cultural studies:
opened up new paths for research

PhD: research on popular culture and girls:
magazines like *Beano*, *Jackie*, *Just Seventeen*

Did a lot of research on popular music,
fashion, creative industries

Mix of sociology, feminist and cultural theory
and “reading” of popular culture



The Aftermath of Feminism *Gender, Culture and Social Change (2008)*

Assesses the heritage/aftermath of feminism as a spectral presence

Focus on public discourse:

- The (popular) media: newspapers, magazine, TV but also popular fiction
- Government policy: New Labour in the UK

Re-examines her own work and theoretical background

Some aspects of the research are specific for Britain, others are more generally applicable

First chapter on Bridget Jones (published as article) had a big impact -> put post-feminism on the map

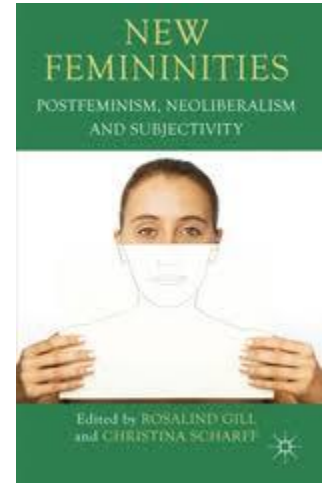
Other case studies in the book: reality shows (make-over programs), different types of young women (put forth in the media), female pathologies, pedagogy

Post-feminism

Term from popular media

Gill and Sharff (*New Femininities* 2011) distinguish four meanings:

- 1) Epistemological sense: intersection of feminism and other 'post' movements (Ann Brooks 1997) -> neutral, positive meaning
- 2) Historical: after second wave -> negative connotation: feminism in decline
- 3) Backlash against feminism
- 4) Sensibility characteristic to early 21st century culture: critical acknowledgment of feminism that coincides with a new emphasis on 'femininity' that is decidedly individualistic, neoliberal and un-feminist



Double entanglement

- The presence of 'strong women' in culture and the media implies victory of feminism
- Feminism is therefore no longer needed
- Ongoing vilification of feminism: no longer needed but still hated -> spectral presence

Problem: equal opportunities especially/primarily for young, white, middleclass women...

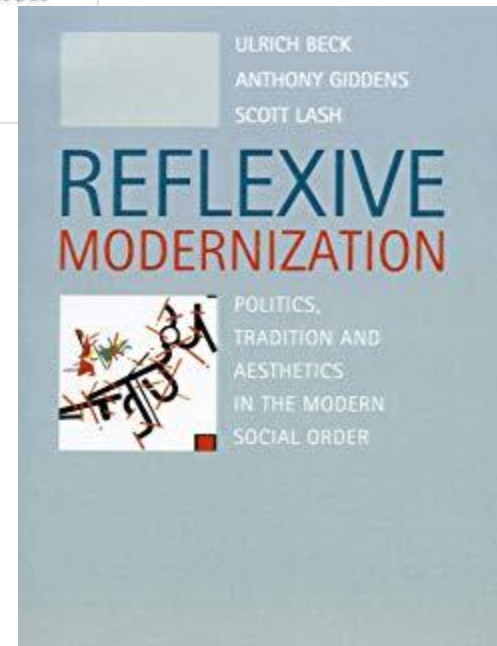
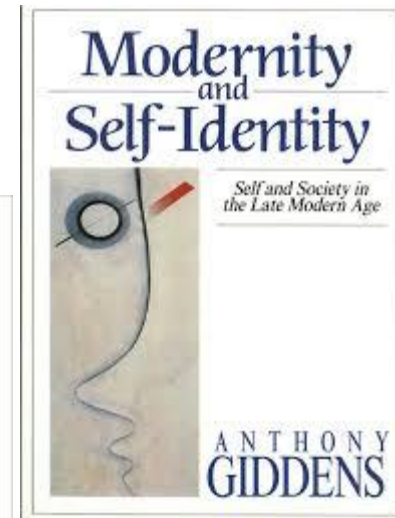


A (self-)critique

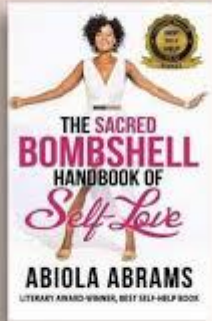
Feminist media and cultural studies 1990s

- Celebration of ordinary life and popular culture e.g., girls magazine en popular television series
- Discomfort
 - What with critique of capitalism?
 - Re-emergence of pornography?
 - Question of race?
- Questioning from within: queer and gender theory

Critique of contemporary sociology:
Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck

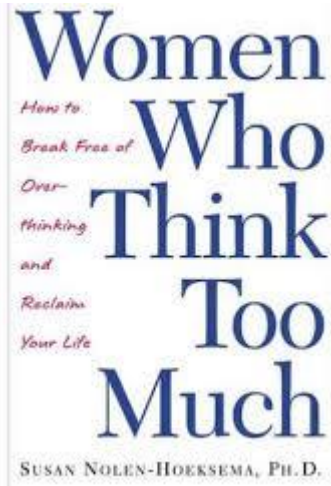


Governmentality (Foucault)



Way of exerting power in contemporary individualist society.

Not by force but by suggestion and advice



Responsibility for monitoring and creating your own life lies with the subject

Individualization of neo-liberal culture -> "choice is a modality of constraint"

Undoing/Complexification of backlash

Backlash

- Active and relentless undermining of feminism
- Return of neo-conservatism (after 1960-1970s)

Afterlife versus backlash

- Feminism is not forgotten, it is part of general education and the organisation of social life (like Marxism)
- But it is made redundant and undermined

Disarticulation

Stuart Hall: **articulation** -> connecting different, seemingly contradictory elements of ideology

Disarticulation: erosion of “cross-border” solidarity e.g, white feminism and anti-racism, single mothers and lesbians and gay men

Anti-racism and multi-culturalism versus ‘political correctness’

Bridget Jones as post-feminist icon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oZu2JfM2Aq8>

Professional young woman, who is not unaware of feminist discourse and achievements

- Ironical stance (make fun of both Bridget's and Darcy's shortcomings, but more Bridget...)
- Endearing return of femininity: clumsiness, plumpness, emotional
- Dream of marriage and traditional family (as in older Hollywood narratives)



Popular media

Daily mail (tabloid) and other women's magazines: pernicious, ambivalent discourse about women

- Bodily scrutiny of female celebrities
- Double standards

Importance of female readership for newspapers

- Women are important consumers -> interest in “female” topics: lifestyle, fashion, make-up, family and children, celebrities
- Also in quality newspapers e.g., *De standaard*, *De Morgen*, *The Guardian*...: lifestyle pages but at the same time room for feminism and criticism of popular discourse e.g., *Guardian* vs. *Daily Mail*

<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/dec/05/beyonce-ed-sheeran-and-our-expectations-of-men-and-women>

Double entanglement (Judith Butler)

“co-existence of neo-conservatist values with process of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations” (p. 12)

- E.g., return of (commercial) marriage culture and gay marriage

Other series: *Sex and the City*, *Friends*, *Girls*, *Dear White People* -> alternatives?

Feminist dismantling versus success

In gender and queer theory: shift away from centralised power to subject and the body

In media: emphasis on female success

- Equal opportunities
- Education
- 'Ideal girls': subjects of excellence

-> Displacement of feminism as political movement versus female individualism

Individualism and expressive modernity (Giddens, Beck)

Meritocracy (those who deserve it are in power)

Life-plan (self-monitoring and reflexivity)

- Freedom but also responsibility (in case of failure)
- Choice as a modality of constraint (p. 19)

The commercialization of female desire

E.g., wedding culture and programs (My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, the Bride from Hell...)

Sex and the City: hype of designer shoes and clothes

Overlap between fictional characters and actresses (e.g., Renée Zellweger, Sarah Jessica Parker and Lena Dunham)

Top Girls

Young Women and the New Sexual Contract

Spotlight: attention is directed to one point, the rest remains in the dark e.g., gay marriage hides the growing conservatism and the failure of many marriages in society

~ **panopticon** (Foucault): prison design: cells around one central point of surveillance -> idea of being watched is internalized -> prisoners monitor their own behaviour

Luminosity created by the light itself, allows a thing or object to exist only a flash, sparkle or shimmer (p. 60)

Space of attention (Butler) operates to sustain and revitalize heterosexual matrix while re-instating and confirming norms of racial hierarchy and reconfiguring class divisions (p. 58)



Four spaces of attention

1. The Fashion-beauty complex
2. Education and employment
3. Phallic girl: sexuality and desire
4. Globalization and recolonialization

1. Fashion-beauty complex

Opportunity to have a career coincides with lifelong regime of maintenance of the body

- Waxing, dieting, exercise, hair treatments, make up, clothing...
- Commercial background: working = consuming

Working on the body = working on the self

Fashion-beauty complex takes the place of the Symbolic Order

- Commercial sites (magazines, newspapers, TV programs) create a normative discourse on femininity.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jm8lWi5X73U>
- Imposes new time frames (e.g., youth-aging, fertility, middle age/menopause)
- Reaction against triple threat against femininity
 - Spectral women's movement
 - Aggressive re-positioning of women in economic process of female individualization
 - Queer theory

Post-feminist masquerade

Female masquerade (Joan Rivière, psychoanalysis): woman compensates for masculine behaviour/achievements by exaggerated womanliness (clothing, behaviour)

Lesbian phallus (Butler): lesbian sexuality as a threat to heterosexuality

- Men are no longer needed (neither for pleasure, nor for reproduction)
- Cf. recurring accusations that women in power must be lesbians (or slept their way to the top)

Post-feminist masquerade = a new form of gender power which re-orchestrates the heterosexual matrix in order to secure, once again, the existence of the patriarchal law and masculine hegemony, *in a kind of ironic, quasi feminist staking out of a distance in the act of taking on the garb of femininity*. (p. 64)

- Idea of “choice” (feminine masquerade is self-chosen) disguises a strong injunction to participate in consumer culture
- Controlling and constraining aspects recognize and pander to sublimated critique of masculinity -> melancholia/rage (p. 68)

What about non-white young women?

Profound undoing of anti-racist feminism (see bell hooks) -
> re-colonialisation

Absence of black and Asian models, except for some
“luminous” exceptions like Naomi Campbell, Iman, ...

Much less choice in cosmetics + popularity of bleaching,
cosmetic surgery for non-white women

Normative whiteness -> limited and exclusionary address
of beauty industry to young, white (light-skinned) women



2. Education and employment: the working girl

Women who do well in school confirm the aspirational ideal of meritocratic values, propagated by New Labour

Historical importance of feminist pedagogy

- crucial aspect of feminism as social movement
- not just in schools and universities but also Do-it-yourself and awareness groups.
- 'Feminization of education': predominance of female teachers is associated with loss of status

Feminist pedagogy that aimed at raising awareness and activism are replaced by new style-pedagogy that emphasizes targets, external ratings -> focus on individual achievement and competition

The Well-planned life

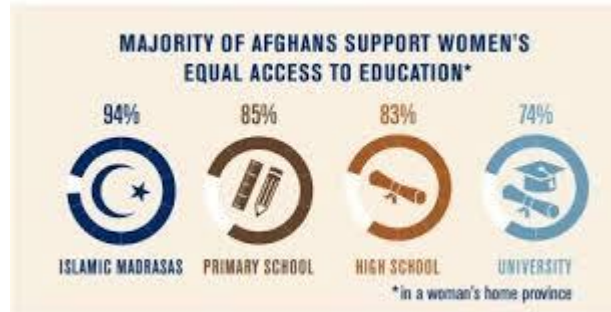


New norm of femininity

- absence of self-organisation = pathology, failure
- Combination of work and feminity gives rise to ideal of “woman who can do it all”: yummy mummy, MILF (sexualized terms)
- Fathers are encouraged to help, but personal choice, private affair, not policy (as in Sweden for instance)




In this way, political goals and demands of feminism are gradually abandoned, in favour of idea(l) of personal achievement.



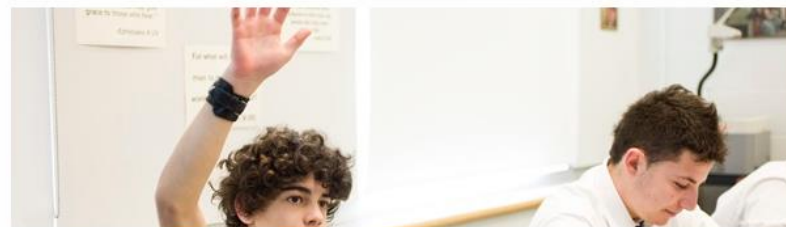
Boys are lagging in schools: has feminization gone too far?

Guest author Paul Bennett discusses the divisive issue of gender and pedagogy

[Find a list of schools](#) 

Why are boys lagging behind girls in today's schools? A couple of weeks ago, **The Toronto Globe and Mail** published a whole series of in-depth articles entitled "Failing Boys" and focusing on the so-called "boy problem" in our schools and in the wider North American society.

How time has changed in education. As recently as 1998, the popular press was full of stories about schools short-changing girls and residual examples of gender bias in our supposedly sanitized, politically-correct textbooks. There is definitely a new gender gap in education: in Canada and North America, boys now rank behind girls on nearly every measure of academic achievement and young men are gradually being superceded in universities and the professions.



New sexual contract

Management of gender and sexuality by a wide range of biopolitical strategies which pre-empt the possibilities of renewed feminist (i.e., political, collective) challenges to patriarchal authority.

Feminism is no longer needed, especially the old feminist demand that men relinquish some of their privileges in work and at home in order to achieve equality is totally abandoned.

However, no actual equality:

- endurance of pay gap
- “new” diseases like stress, burnout (not just for women but linked to neo-liberal climate).

Stay-At-Home-Dad



What my friends think I do.



What my mom thinks I do.



What my wife thinks I do.



What my neighbors
thinks I do.



What I think I do.



What I actually do.

3. Sexuality: the phallic girl



Phallic girl (ladette) cf. phallic lesbian -> political figure who wrestles power from the Symbolic

Freedom associated with male sexuality: drinking, smoking, defiant clothing style, sexual freedom -> type of the “ladette” (very British cultural type)

Licensed transgression



(Very) Limited License

Facilitated by fashion beauty industry and tabloid press

Limitations:

- Only young women, not married (e.g., Miley Cyrus) or very strong independent women (e.g., Samantha in Sex and the City)
- Strictly forbidden = (teenage) single mothers, especially with multiple children who are depicted as taking advantage from the welfare state
- Underlying hostility e.g., rape charges and the persisting idea that women have provoked it by their style of dressing or behaviour
 - Association with lower class and bad taste



4. Mobility and ethnicity: the global girl

Prevalence of racist imagination

-> exclusion of non-white women and re-colonization

Exception: global girl in advertisement as a representation of corporate multiculturalism

- International women's magazines (e.g., Vogue or Cosmopolitan)
- United Colors of Benetton



Mobile, transnational girl as an ideal **versus** fears of uncontrolled fertility or threatening religious values of 'unwanted' immigrants (e.g., from the Middle East)



Conclusion

There is a new sexual contract issued to young women which encourages activity concentrated in education and employment so as to ensure participation in the production of successful femininity, sexuality and eventually maternity. The commercial domain requires that women prioritize consumption for the sake of sexual intelligibility and in the name of heterosexual desire, and this in turn intersects with and confirms the neo-liberal turn by contemporary government with its emphasis on consumer-citizenship.

The spaces of attention and luminosities supplant and substitute for the various forms of political mobilisation associated with feminism as a social movement, they also relegate politics to the back of women's lives, and political culture comes to be dominated by a technocratic style of 'corporate managerialism'. (p. 90)

Alternatives: New feminist activisms?



- <http://www.themarysue.com/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/user/feministfrequency>
- <https://www.ted.com/topics/feminism>
- Emma Watson UN speech
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkjW9PZBRfk>

Living a Feminist Life (Sara Ahmed, 2016)

Feminist, queer and race studies

How bodies and worlds take shape and how power is secured and challenged

2016: professor of race and cultural studies at Goldsmith
->resigned in protest against failure to deal with problem of sexual harassment

Independent scholar

<https://www.saranahmed.com>

<https://feministkilljoys.com>

<https://www.kaaitheater.be/en/agenda/closing-the-door-complaint-as-diversity-work>





Analysis of literature and film



Interviews



Following the words-> building up a trail of expressions to follow a problem through

Bringing Feminist Theory Home

Brown, lesbian, feminist activist

Find a community and tradition of feminism

- Theory & Life
- The Personal is the political and the political is personal
- Homework: family table, street corner, classroom

We? Auntie figure: different origins of feminism

Following the trail of words and figures

Happiness

Movement

Snap

Dwelling

Arm

...

Killjoy

Policing feminist

Lesbian feminist

Willful girl

(Grimm: the willful child)

...

Critical Theory versus Feminism

Third wave feminism and poststructuralist theory -> influence of Foucault, Deleuze...

Theory = white, male institution -> 'post' feminism, post race, post identity politics

Decision: only cite feminist or postcolonial scholars



Cartoon by Maurice Henry, published in La Quinzaine Littéraire, 1 July 1967.

Difficulty versus wide audience

Intervention in academic feminism

- Slow arguments
- Revisit old ground
- Difficulty is not a problem

Blog:

wide audience

Poetry, repetition -> insistence on words and structures

Sweaty Concepts

Concepts as lifelines (Audre Lorde)

Empirical and worldly (in the world, Said)

Effort and labor

-> Words = building blocks to create worlds,
versus walls

Against TERF

= Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminism

Fragile archive (vs. internal division of feminism)

- Material
- Bodily

Conclusion 1: A Killjoy survival kit

1. Books
2. Things
3. Tools
4. Time
5. Life
6. Permission Notes
7. Other Killjoys
8. Humor
9. Feelings
10. Bodies/Wriggle room

Conclusion 2: A Killjoy manifesto

Within tradition of feminist manifestos

- Donna Haraway: The Cyborg Manifesto
- SCUM Valerie Solanas (who shot Andy Warhol): Society for cutting up men
- Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex

-> **Killjoy** ~murderous feminist: kills life/happiness

Anger, disagreeable: downer, unhappiness

Transformation & rebellion: 'snap'

Bring the Master's house down vs. building feminist dwelling

Principles

1. Not willing to make happiness my cause
2. Willing to cause unhappiness
3. Willing to support others who are causing unhappiness
4. Not willing to laugh at jokes designed to create offense
5. Not willing to get over histories that are not over

6. Not willing to be included if inclusion means being included in system that is unjust, violent and unequal

7. Willing to live a life deemed by others unhappy

8. Willing to put the 'hap' (chance) back into happiness

9. Willing to snap any bonds no matter how precarious

10. Willing to participate in killjoy movement

