

Postfeminism and the new cultural life of feminism

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Over the past few years feminism has achieved a new luminosity in popular culture. Feminist books such as *Lean In* (Sandberg, 2013) and *Unfinished Business* (Slaughter, 2015) top the best-seller lists, glossy magazines launch ‘feminism issues’, musicians and other celebrities proudly proclaim their feminist identities, and stories about unequal pay or sexual harassment that would, a few years ago, have been dismissed as a ‘yawn’ – too boring to be reported – have become the stuff of newspaper headlines and primetime news broadcasts. Feminism is becoming ‘popular’ (Banet-Weiser, 2015), ‘cool’ (Valenti, 2014) and achieving a ‘new visibility’ (Keller & Ryan 2014).

One way of reading this ‘new cultural life of feminism’ has been to suggest that critical notions like postfeminism may no longer hold force or have analytical purchase for this changed context. Diane Negra (2014: 275) notes that “we now need to inquire whether/how accounts of gender developed in an earlier era still apply”, whilst Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence (2015) suggest the need to “interrogate some of the core ideas of postfeminism as theorised by media scholars”, arguing that postfeminism is “potentially redundant” in the light of “fourth wave” social media-based feminist activism. Catherine Lumby (2011) calls for scholars to move “past the post” and Imelda Whelehan (2010: 159) writes of her “frustration, boredom and ennui” with the term. In what follows I want to respond to this sense of disenchantment with the briefest defence of postfeminism that I frame – only partly in jest - as a “manifesto” for continued critical work using the term.

1. Postfeminism is a critical term. Postfeminist culture should be our object of analysis, not a position or a perspective. I do not see myself as a “postfeminist analyst” but as an analyst of postfeminism – a patterned yet contradictory

- sensibility connected to other dominant formations such as neoliberalism. Elements of this sensibility “coexist with and are structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to 'race' and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability – as well as gender” (Gill, 2007).
2. New cultural trends do not simply displace older or existing ones. A momentarily visible resurgence of interest in feminism should not lead us to the false conclusion that anti-feminist or postfeminist ideas no longer exist. To contest such a celebratory view we need only to think about the persistence of the sexual double standard, even after decades of feminist activism, cultural production, policy and media discussion.
 3. Our analyses need to be attentive to both continuity and change, as well as to the ‘entanglement’ (McRobbie, 2009) of feminism with other ideas. I argue that some of what is celebrated today as feminism is shaped by profoundly postfeminist elements (Gill, 2016a) – particularly those aspects that relate to corporate culture, celebrity and the embrace of feminism as a ‘stylish’ identity. We need approaches that can offer subtle and complicated appreciations of the way that multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist in the same moment, plane, field.
 4. Cultural life is contradictory. For every uplifting account of feminist activism, there is another of misogyny; for every feminist “win”, an outpouring of hate ranging from sexual harassment to torture and death threats against those involved; for every instance of feminist solidarity, another of vicious trolling. We need to be able to ‘think together’ the contradictions of the current moment and refuse the seductions of simple singular narratives (Banet-Weiser, 2015a; Garcia-Favaro and Gill, 2015; Gill, 2016a).
 5. The new cultural visibility of feminism includes many versions of feminism – some of which are antithetical to each other. These operate in an attention economy that is deeply shaped by patterns of exclusion and domination. Some of the newly celebrated feminisms have a neoliberal understanding at their core and have little in common with other circulating feminisms, being exponents of an individualistic, entrepreneurial ideology that is complicit with rather than critical of capitalism, and of other (classed, racialised and transnational) systems of injustice (hooks, 2013). In this way they may be connected to the neoliberalization or ‘Righting of feminism’ (Rottenberg and Farris, 2015).
 6. Postfeminism requires empirical study. To say that something is ‘postfeminist’ should be the beginning not the end of an analytic process. Despite an earlier focus of research on a few key media texts such as *Ally McBeal*, *Bridget Jones’s*

- Diary and Sex and the City* (Arthurs, 2003; Moseley and Read, 2002; McRobbie, 2004) there is no postfeminist ‘canon’; the term can be used productively across social, cultural, political, economic and psychic life. Studies of the messy, complicated, fine-grained texture of social and cultural life are urgently needed. I argue that postfeminism should open up rather than close down thinking, should stimulate questions, generate novel ideas, and produce new insights.
7. We need to think about postfeminism in intersectional and transnational terms. Postfeminism is not ‘for white women only’ (Butler, 2013), nor is it a uniquely Western or Northern sensibility (Dosekun, 2015). Whilst the focus of much research has been on media constructions of white, middle class, young, heterosexual and cisgendered women, postfeminism as a sensibility traverses boundaries, interpellating older, trans*, queer and working class subjects too. Research is also urgently needed to explore how postfeminism connects with other discursive formations such as ‘austerity neoliberalism’ (De Benedictis, 2016) and ‘post-queer’ (McNicholas Smith, 2014).
 8. Postfeminism has a ‘psychic life’ (Butler, 2007; Scharff, 2015; Gill, 2016b). It does not simply exist in media, but shapes our subjectivities and relationships in profound ways, remaking our very selfhood. The ‘cult(ure) of confidence’ (Gill and Orgad, 2015) with its exhortations to ‘lean in’ and ‘love your body’ offers a vivid example, systematically calling into being a new kind of female subject. It seeks to persuade us that women are being held back not by patriarchal capitalism or institutionalised sexism, but by their own lack of confidence – a lack that is presented as being entirely an individual and personal matter, unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces.
 9. Feminism and postfeminism are structured by an affective politics. The ‘state of esteem’ (Cruikshank, 1993), the ‘happiness industry’ (Davies, 2015) and the ‘psy complex’ (Rose, 1998) are technologies of self (Foucault, 1988) with which feminism is profoundly entangled. As well as being part of a troubling therapeutic turn which frames injustice in terms of individual deficits or character flaws, the current overwhelming focus on “positive mental attitude” is disturbing for the way in which it polices intelligible – and eligible – affects. Increasingly emotions such as anger and rage are disallowed or rendered toxic states for women even in some feminist writing – ugly, unappealing and abject – in ways that reaffirm Sara Ahmed’s (2010) eloquent discussion of the “feminist killjoy”. Likewise, if ‘confidence is the new sexy’, then insecurity is the new ugly – a feared and

- degraded emotion to be repudiated at all costs – and already tied to circulating ideas of classed value through the notion of the women with ‘low self-esteem’.
10. Surveillance is a feminist issue. Not just at the level of the state or corporations but in finer-grained ‘ways of looking’ (Berger, 1972) including the ‘girlfriend gaze’ (Winch, 2013), ‘surveillant sisterhood’ (Elias and Gill, 2016), and ‘neoliberal optics’ (Haywood, 2013). Postfeminism is deeply implicated in surveillance, including self-surveillance and co-veillance/ peer-surveillance. Studies are urgently needed of ‘postfeminist looking’ (Riley *et al*, 2016) and of the new forms of labour that postfeminism mandates (Elias *et al*, 2016)

The ideas mentioned briefly here are elaborated more fully in 6 full-length papers published 2015-2017 examining the new visibility of feminism (Gill, 2016a), the psychic life of postfeminism (Gill, 2016b), the confidence cult(ure) (Gill and Orgad, 2015) and the ‘Righting of feminism’ (Gill and Orgad, forthcoming), the banality of misogyny (Garcia-Favaro and Gill, 2015) and the intensification of ‘beauty surveillance’ and the quantified self (Elias and Gill, 2016).

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