

The background of the cover is a dark blue field filled with numerous bright, vertical, and slightly curved light trails that create a sense of motion and depth, resembling a long-exposure photograph of light or a digital data visualization.

Repudiating Feminism

Young Women in a Neoliberal World

Christina Scharff

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Repudiating Feminism

Young Women in a Neoliberal World

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Introduction

In many contemporary western European societies, the mention of the term ‘feminism’ frequently provokes unease, bewilderment, or overt hostility. These responses stand in stark contrast to widespread support for gender equality. Feminism, it seems, is met with suspicion, even in countries that pride themselves on their allegedly progressive stance on gender and sexuality. Young women also seem to be reluctant to claim feminism. They want to be treated equally, and are aware of gender inequalities. Yet, the term feminism often gives rise to negative, affect-laden responses. This book is about those responses. By exploring young women’s engagements with feminism in Germany and Britain, it shows that heterosexual conventions, neoliberalism, postfeminism and difference facilitate repudiations of feminism. Undoubtedly, there are young women who embrace feminism. For them, feminism is imagined differently, leading to various forms of engagement. Indeed, there has been a resurgence of feminist activism in recent years. However, feminism remains contested. This book sheds light on why this is the case.

Young women who do not identify as feminists tell two main stories about feminism. They either regard it as valuable, but no longer necessary, or as extreme and ideological. Feminism is thus viewed positively (valuable but no longer necessary) and negatively (extreme and ideological). However, both perspectives facilitate a rejection of feminism, either as redundant or as extreme. The two sets of narratives about feminism resonate with, and reflect, a postfeminist sensibility where feminism is both taken into account and, simultaneously, repudiated. In the postfeminist era, feminist perspectives have become common sense and form part of young women’s narratives of gender issues. Indeed, they often remain unacknowledged which signifies the extent to which feminist viewpoints have been taken on board. And yet, when feminism is explicitly mentioned or claimed, the term is met with negative responses. In the postfeminist cultural climate, feminism remains a fraught terrain.

The fashioning and production of neoliberal subjectivities also facilitates rejections of feminism. In a neoliberal postfeminist era, young women are positioned as beneficiaries of increased opportunities. Now able to work, consume, and control reproduction, young women are called upon to manage their lives independently. This neoliberal, individualist imperative does not sit well with perceptions of feminism as involving collective struggle. Young women reject feminism because they regard it as a collective movement which robs them of the opportunity to navigate their lives self-responsibly, even if this involves dealing with structural inequalities on an individual level. Crucially, young women’s self-presentation as capable managers of their lives is intertwined with the construction

of their cultural other, the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’, who is portrayed as being a passive victim of patriarchal culture. Neo-colonial constructions of cultural difference move feminism away from the self, to ‘other’ communities and parts of the world.

The ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ is not the only figure that emerges in the context of repudiations of feminism. Feminism is frequently associated with man-hatred, lesbianism and unfemininity. Queer theory, and its focus on sexuality and desire as structuring principles, allows us to analyse *how* and *why* feminism becomes imagined in these ways. The figure of the man-hating, lesbian and unfeminine feminist haunts engagements with feminism. It crops up across different sites – in women’s attitudes towards feminism throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, in academic discourse, in media representations and in young women’s imaginations of feminism – and yet, it is nowhere. It is nowhere in the sense that young women struggle to provide examples for feminists who correspond to the stereotype. However, they frequently hold on to the mythic construction of ‘the feminist’. The figure of ‘the feminist’ is both absent and present in young women’s talk. It is frequently evoked but cannot be pinned down. The absent presence of the figure of the feminist can be productively conceptualised as a constitutive outside of heterosexual conventions. The unfeminine woman, the woman who does not like men and desires other women challenges, but also makes intelligible, heterosexual norms.

When young women negotiate feminism, they also negotiate the associations of feminism with man-hatred, lesbianism and unfeminine women. (Not) taking up a feminist identity requires careful positioning work in the heterosexual matrix. Young women who discuss feminism often feel they have to navigate, or pre-empt, being regarded a man-hater or a lesbian. The performative approach taken in this book reveals that engagements with feminism frequently involve performances of gender and sexuality: what does it mean if a woman repudiates feminism because it is associated with lesbianism? Is this a performative citation of heterosexuality and femininity? Engagements with feminism are structured by reiterations, but also subversions, of heterosexual norms. Gender and sexuality are variously taken up, and troubled in repudiations of feminism. Crucially, heterosexual norms intersect with race and class. The association of feminism with unfeminine women, for example, is lived out differently by women who are positioned as inside or outside notions of respectable (coded white and middle-class) femininity. A performative approach foregrounds the various ways in which sexuality, race and class matter, and come to matter, in engagements with feminism.

Scope of the study

My exploration of young women’s repudiations of feminism is interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from gender studies, cultural studies, critical psychology, queer

theory and sociology¹. The research is based on a qualitative study, involving forty semi-structured in-depth interviews with young women in Germany and Britain. Of course, ‘young women’ do not represent a homogenous entity. I interviewed lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women, and women from different class and racial backgrounds. Equally, ‘feminism’ is a contingent term, representing many different theories and there is no one women’s movement with a unified set of goals (Bergman, 2004; Gerhard, 2004a; Riley, 1988; Whelehan, 1995). This means that feminism has to be approached flexibly, particularly in cross-cultural research where understandings of feminism may differ according to cultural context (Bergmann, 2004; Gerhard, 2004b). For these reasons, I regard ‘feminism’ and the ‘women’s movement’ as *discursive* categories to signify various understandings of the terms and to avoid exclusionary definitions (Butler, 1992). This does not imply that we should cease to use the term feminism, but that we should release it “into a future of multiple significations” (Butler, 1992: 16).

Repudiating Feminism is motivated by the attempt to understand the affective nature of engagements with feminism. As a young woman, and a feminist, I was struck by forceful and hostile rejections of feminism. Responses to feminism did not seem to be motivated by a political and critical interrogation of feminism and its subjects (Butler, 1992). Instead, it was the hostility and the more or less overt aggressiveness that emerged from casual discussions about gender issues or from statements that there still *are* inequalities and that I *am* a feminist which prompted me to embark on this study. I was particularly interested in hearing the voices of young women in Germany and Britain as I had encountered rejections of feminism in both contexts. While it is commonly accepted that young women do not identify as feminists, few studies explore this phenomenon empirically and from a cross-cultural perspective. *Repudiating Feminism* attempts to fill this gap.

Most of the women that I interviewed would not call themselves a feminist (thirty out of forty). Indeed, there were only two research participants who said that they would describe themselves as feminists; eight used several provisos, such as being a feminist, but not a man-hater. Of course, responses to feminism shifted over the course of several statements, or the interview. Overwhelmingly,

1 I do not draw on social movement theory to analyse young women’s engagements with feminism. Social movement theory is a complex field, including at least four different approaches to the study of social movements (collective behaviour; resource mobilisation; political process and new social movements) (Della Porta and Diani, 1999). While social movement theory offers important theoretical tools to analyse social movement activism, it mainly focuses on the public/institutional realm (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; Müller, 1992; Lenz, 2001) and is predominantly concerned with explaining the *emergence* of social movements (Bagguley, 2002; Dackweiler, 1995; Goodwin and Jasper, 2003). To be sure, less mainstream approaches to social movement research exist that include personal and biographical perspectives (Miethe, 1999; Roth, 2000; 2003; Passerini, 1998; Roseneil, 2000; 2003). However, mainstream social movement theory does not lend itself to my research question which is to explore young women’s *subjective* engagements with feminism and, in the context of my data, their repudiation of it.

however, the research participants rejected feminism. My aim in this book is not to make a general statement about young women's relationship with feminism; a sample of forty women does not allow me to draw such conclusions. My research interest is narrower. Given that feminism was overwhelmingly repudiated by the young women I interviewed, I mainly focus on the various dynamics that facilitate rejections of feminism. An analysis of these processes also tells us something about broader, contemporary social currents, such as the workings of heterosexual norms, processes of othering, individualisation and neoliberalisation. The broader social dynamics were remarkably similar in Britain and Germany. In the context of my research, the cross-cultural lens highlighted similarities, rather than differences, in how feminism is negotiated in the two countries.

Outline of the book

The book opens with a discussion of feminist research on young women's engagements with feminism. Chapter 1 explores various perspectives on feminist dis-identification and develops my performative approach (Butler, 1993; 1999). The chapter introduces the main findings of my research and contextualises them by discussing the German and British socio-historical contexts, as well as recent developments, such as the resurgence of young women's feminist activism in both countries. Chapter 1 ends with an overview of the research methodology, outlining the sample, ethical issues and the interpretative frame.

Chapter 2 begins the in-depth analysis of the interviews by sketching rhetorical patterns in the data. One set of arguments depicted feminism as a valuable social movement that has brought about gender equality and therefore was no longer needed. A competing perspective portrayed feminism as an extreme stance that goes too far. Paying special attention to the allocation of feminism to the past and its status as both commendable and fiercely repudiated, I use the concept of postfeminism (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2004a, b; 2009) to theorise the co-existence of two seemingly competing narratives about feminism. Although the prevalence of postfeminist discourses mainly facilitated rejections of feminism, feminism was also supported. There were moments of feminist identification in individual statements and interviews.

Chapter 3 moves beyond the concept of postfeminism and explores how feminism is disarticulated through processes of individualisation and neoliberal responsibilisation. Paying particular attention to the subject positions that individualist and neoliberal rhetoric carve out for young women, I show that their self-identification as empowered subjects of social change (Baker, 2008; 2010; Gonick, 2006; McRobbie, 2009), who self-responsibly deal with structural constraints, meant that feminism was rarely claimed. While the research participants frequently portrayed themselves as empowered, they characterised other women, particularly the figure of the 'oppressed Muslim woman', as passive victims of patriarchal cultural practices. Problematising various aspects of the trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman', such as the production of neo-colonial

forms of knowledge about the 'other', I conclude by arguing that the construction of the 'other woman' as powerless was central to maintaining the intelligibility of the research participants' positioning as empowered.

Chapter 4 focuses on the second central figure that characterised the research participants' talk: the man-hating, unfeminine, lesbian feminist. I show how and why 'the feminist' is frequently connected to unfemininity, man-hating and lesbianism. In addition, I conceptualise the trope of the feminist as a constitutive outside of the heteronormative order which haunts the research participants' accounts. In advancing the more general argument that constructions of the feminist should be located in the heterosexual matrix, this chapter makes a broader epistemological point by demonstrating how German and British imaginations of feminism are structured by heterosexual conventions.

Chapter 5 demonstrates that performative citations of femininity are a central element of negotiations of feminism. Many research participants distanced themselves from feminism as connoting homosexuality and/or unfemininity. I make the argument that such repudiations constitute performances of gender and sexuality. Importantly, the links between a portrayal of feminists as unfeminine; a performative citation of heterosexual femininity; and a repudiation of feminism have to be left open. While heterosexual norms structure engagements with feminism, gender and sexuality are differently taken up and performed in feminist dis-identifications. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2002; 2004c) performative conceptualisation of race, and on a cultural approach to class (Skeggs, 1997a, 2005; Devine and Savage, 2005), the chapter also traces how race and class are assumed in talk about feminism. Thus, the chapter charts how young women's positionings in relation to gender, sexuality, race and class cut across engagements with feminism.

The final chapter widens the scope of the book by putting its main findings into dialogue with recent popular German writings on feminism. Triggered by a public debate on demographic changes which blamed feminism for the shrinking of 'the German population', there have been various endorsements of a new feminism in Germany (Dorn, 2006; Eismann, 2007; Haaf, Klingner, Streidl, 2008a; Hensel and Raether, 2008a; Koch-Mehrin, 2007). As opposed to the majority of my research participants, the new feminists claim feminism. However, a closer analysis reveals similar repudiatory processes in the promotion of a new feminism which parallels the participants' accounts. Both provide individualist narratives and are at pains to distance themselves from man-hating (versions of) feminism. The cultural sign of the 'feminist-as-lesbian' (Hesford, 2005) also features in these recent attempts to re-brand feminism. In exploring a different site where the trope of the feminist (Tomlinson, 2010) appears, this concluding chapter gestures towards the broader implications of the book. An understanding of the pervasiveness of 'the feminist' requires a critical engagement with how heterosexual norms structure common imaginations of feminism in Europe and beyond.

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Chapter 1

Young Women and Feminism

It has been widely documented that feminism is unpopular amongst young women (Jowett, 2004; Karsch, 2004; McRobbie, 2009; Reiss, 2004; Rich, 2005; Rúðólfsdóttir and Jolliffe, 2008; Stöcker, 2007). According to Sinikka Appola, Mamina Gonick and Anita Harris (2005: 195), “it is commonly accepted that young women are not especially interested in feminism as a label or a movement any more”. A survey conducted in 2006 showed that 71% of British women distance themselves from feminism (Womankind, 2006) and interviews in Britain and Germany demonstrate young women’s (dis-)investment in feminism (Jowett, 2004; see also Rich, 2005; Rúðólfsdóttir and Jolliffe, 2008; Reiss, 2004; Woodward and Woodward, 2009). According to Angela McRobbie, young women’s relationship with feminism has changed. While characterised by a politically productive dis-identification with feminism¹ in the early 1990s, young women’s attitudes towards feminism “have consolidated into something closer to repudiation rather than ambivalence” (McRobbie, 2004b: 257). *Feminist dis-identification* constitutes the contested and fraught territory of young women’s attitudes towards feminism.

Feminist researchers have provided various reasons to explain why many young women reject feminism. Some argue that generational differences discourage young women from identifying as feminist (Gerhard, 1999; Landweer, 1993; Pilcher, 1998). McRobbie (2004 a, b; 2009) and Rosalind Gill (2007a) have developed further the concept of postfeminism to designate a cultural era where feminism is taken into account but also forcefully repudiated. Feminist academics² and journalists also highlight negative media representations and stereotypes of feminism to argue that such hostile discourses render the movement unpopular amongst the young (Bail, 1996; Bulbeck, 1997; Kailer and Bierbaum, 2002; Kramer, 1998; Karsch, 2004; Johnson, 2002; Rottmann, 1998; Schulz, 2010). Numerous researchers suggest that young women regard gender equality as having been achieved, distancing themselves from feminism as anachronistic (Budgeon,

1 Following Butler, McRobbie saw young women’s critical engagement with feminism in the 1990s as signifying a hopeful dis-identification. In reflecting upon the political promises of dis-identification, Butler (1993: 219) states that “it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that failure of identification is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference”.

2 Unless otherwise stated, the German texts that I draw on are academic articles and books. The authors have different disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from philosophy (i.e. Landweer), education (i.e. Reiss), to sociology (i.e. Hark, Lenz, Gerhard) and social psychology (i.e. Knapp).