

Book review

Contemporary Culture and the Undoing of Feminism

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Angela McRobbie

The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change

Sage, London, 2009

ISBN 9780761970620 (pb) 9780761970613 (hb)

RRP £19.99 (pb) £62.00 (hb)

A couple of times a year (usually around International Women's Day or the latest gender controversy) there'll be a journalist on the phone, asking me, 'where is feminism now?' Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* provides the perfect answer, though one that probably won't be dutifully reported in the pages of the *Courier-Mail*. McRobbie has always been a preeminent figure in feminist cultural studies, and this work highlights her continuing importance. Indeed, *The Aftermath of Feminism* reminds us of the power of feminist cultural studies to explain what's going on, whether this is in the media, popular culture, everyday life, governmentality, the corporate world, or their interrelationships. And McRobbie's diagnosis of 'a social and cultural landscape which could be called post-feminist' (1) is uncompromising, far-reaching in scope, and deeply disturbing.

Throughout her earlier groundbreaking work, such as the study of girls' fan magazines, fashion or pop music, McRobbie was a cultural optimist. She argued for

the emancipatory potential of popular cultural forms, especially with regards to young women, though without the voluntaristic populism-come-idealism marking some versions of cultural studies. *The Aftermath of Feminism*, however, marks a self-proclaimed shift in her thinking about popular culture as well as the operations of feminist cultural studies. She is now critical of her (and feminist cultural studies') earlier use of subversion (derived from de Certeau) to theorise the oppositional potential of popular culture. This, for McRobbie, was a misplaced optimism which underestimated the role that the media-entertainment complex would play in the neoliberal political agenda and its 'undoing of feminism' and remaking of a gender regime. (4–5) Thus *The Aftermath of Feminism* aims to be a work of 'feminist retrieval and renewal' of feminist cultural studies and politics in the hostile context of post-feminist culture.

McRobbie defines post-feminism as:

a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period ... I argue that something quite unexpected has happened. Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life [but in an individualistic form] ... as a kind of substitute for feminism. These new and seemingly 'modern' ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively, so as to ensure that a new women's movement will not re-emerge. (1)

Her book aims to complexify feminist backlash, and thus traces just what is offered by government, media, and popular culture in exchange for feminism, and why. This exchange she terms 'a new form of sexual contract' that is offered to young women in return for abandoning feminism, one that promises them the freedom of economic independence and the pleasures of consumer citizenship in return for being the subjects required by the neoliberal economy: good consumers and good workers. (2) McRobbie's methodology is a blend of sociological and cultural studies analysis, a combination that ensures her analyses are broad in scope, theoretically astute, grounded, and linked to larger socioeconomic shifts. To redress the weaknesses in certain versions of feminist cultural studies analyses she draws heavily upon Judith Butler (most notably, *Antigone's Claim* and *The Psychic Life of*

Power)¹ and Bourdieu, as well as revisiting feminist psychoanalytical work such as Mary Ann Doane's and Diana Fuss's work on fashion photography. This is neither an ethnography nor based on fieldwork, rather, it is a survey of 'changes in film, television, popular culture and the world of women's magazines'". (6) McRobbie's focus is on the United Kingdom from the 1990s onwards, but her findings have resonances throughout the West, or wherever reality TV, Blairite 'reformism' and the neoliberal agenda have made their presence felt.

McRobbie bases her analysis around a number of key concepts that strikingly encapsulate the state of feminism, the interpellation of young women and the political operations of popular culture. For example, McRobbie uses the phrase 'the movement of women' to signify the key role women have in advancing the modernisation process in the West along neoliberal lines, as well as the changes that have been granted to women; however, this phrase also suggests the displacement and substitution of the women's movement for young women. She argues for the notion of 'double entanglement' to refer to the way in which feminism has become almost commonsense but also reviled; 'feminism undone' as a descriptor of the remade field of gender hierarchies (which inevitably impacts upon race, ethnicity, and social class); and 'post-feminist masquerade' as the term for the technology that makes the new anti-feminist woman. Further, McRobbie draws upon Deleuze's concept of 'luminosities' to describe how young women are 'brought forward, as individualised subjects' with a range of capacities making them agents of change; Bourdieu's 'symbolic violence' to explain the class, gender, and racial dynamics of, for instance, reality television programs; and 'nostalgia for whiteness' to mark the disappearance of an anti-racist politics and therefore a cultural recolonisation.

The first chapter, 'Post-Feminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime' defines and explores post-feminism by discussing the historical trajectory of academic feminism since the 1990s, Ulrich Beck's and Anthony Giddens' accounts of individualisation, the notion of female success, popular culture's and advertising's tactical ironic 'knowingness' regarding feminism, and by providing a reading of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. She makes a compelling argument for the role played by the language of 'choice' in normalising 'post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women'. (22) McRobbie's method, in which she moves from theoretical critique and sociological analysis to

close readings of popular culture texts, occurs throughout *The Aftermath of Feminism*, and results in a wide range of issues and texts being discussed in each chapter.

The second chapter shifts focus to political culture, and the ways in which feminism is being undone in the name of modernisation. By 'undone' McRobbie is referring to two related dynamics: first, the way in which British feminism's alliances with other forms of radical politics, namely, anti-racist and radical sexuality, are being disarticulated, with a resultant limitation of the sexual politics and forms of collectivity available to young women (and others). Second, she refers to the necessary disconnection of young women from feminism by the neoliberal order: young women have a special role to play in the next stage of modernisation—as docile workers and consumers in a service-based economy—and hence their allegiance to a genuine feminist politics must be discouraged. Consequently, they are offered a substitute by the state, a faux feminism of seeming freedom and equality.

Young women also feature in the chapter, 'Top Girls? Young Women and the New Sexual Contract'. This chapter, along with 'Illegible Rage: Post-Feminist Eating Disorders', was for me the strongest part of the book: these chapters are ambitious in theoretical scope and provide a number of original insights and frameworks for understanding various symptoms of the post-feminist landscape. McRobbie develops her idea of young women as special agents of change in the modernisation process and it is here that she fully explicates her notion of the new sexual contract: 'Young women are able to come forward [as economic subjects, as educated, as controllers of fertility, as consumers] on condition that feminism fades away'. (56) She argues for the centrality played by the fashion-beauty complex in remaking and reinstating the power of the symbolic via 'post-feminist masquerade' which 'emerges as a new cultural dominant'. (63) This masquerade describes the methods by which young women now take on a femininity marked by irony, artifice and free choice. Further, she traces the interpellation of four types of feminine subjectivity amenable to modernisation: as well as the girl who chooses 'post-feminist masquerade' there is the 'well-educated working girl', the 'phallic girl' and 'the global girl'. These figures work to maintain racialised and heteronormative hierarchies.

In 'Illegible Rage', McRobbie makes a detailed analysis of 'the realm of female disorders' such as anorexia and cutting. She challenges conventional interpretations of these disorders, and instead argues (with some similarities to Susan Bordo's work) that these conditions are markers of young women's melancholic loss of feminism—bodily indices of psychic pain arising from conflicted and seemingly impossible desires of and for feminism. McRobbie uses Butler's work on gender and melancholia and feminist psychoanalysis's theorisation of fashion photography to demonstrate how young women give up same-sex desire and feminist desire, and instead are contained by the compensations of popular culture.

The chapter "'What Not To Wear" and Post-Feminist Symbolic Violence' is a scathing indictment of reality television programs of the makeover variety. McRobbie's socialist feminist analysis is incisive, as she argues that they are forms of symbolic violence against working-class and lower middle-class women. She demonstrates how these programs teach women to compete against each other and to take up the required feminine classed position within a new, meritocratic economic structure based upon service industries. The shows seemingly offer social mobility via aspirational glamour, but instead are based upon British class hatred and work to maintain class and racial hierarchies.

McRobbie's conclusion ranges from a discussion of feminism in the globalised university classroom, gender mainstreaming, popular third wave feminism, to Rosi Braidotti's optimistic feminist philosophy. This range of topics in the conclusion indicates one of the book's weaknesses as well as its strengths. The scope of the book, encompassing, for example, contemporary sociological theory, *Fatal Attraction*, Tracey Emin, ladette culture, and gay and lesbian marriage, is impressive and compelling, for McRobbie so presciently identifies the zones or sites of postfeminism. Sometimes within certain chapters, however, the parts do not seem to cohere as well as they could, giving a fragmented impression, or a lengthy excursion into theoretical critique does not sit easily within the chapter's argument and makes it lose drive. And the book needs a better copyedit (an aftermath of outsourcing by publishing houses, I suspect). Regardless, *The Aftermath of Feminism* is a major contribution not only to feminist cultural studies, but to cultural studies and women's studies as well. McRobbie shows what a politically committed cultural studies can do, offering a comprehensive and incisive account of postfeminism and

feminism's current politico-cultural location. She provides a powerful analysis of the feminine spaces, texts and subjectivities of neoliberal culture, and the ways in which these are required by an economico-gender order undergoing transition, and hence reliant on an undoing of feminism.

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¹ Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000; Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997.