Justus-Liebig-Universität
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*From Proto-Feminism to Queer Studies and Beyond*
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*Portfolio*

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Class 1: Feminism, an off-again, on-again relationship?

During and after class one was a time to think critically about my own notions of and relationship with feminism. I actually came into the lecture as someone who had been engaged in feminist communities online for quite a while, but pulled back out because I had not agreed with their very radical ideas and methods based mostly on hatred of any and all ‘privileged’ groups; for them, social justice activism seemed more of a tool to bully others than a movement through which they wanted to change the world for the better.

Engaging with these groups had made me feel nothing but guilt and hostility and all of that had eventually led to a row with my brother and father that I still regret. So I had made a personal decision not to stand with groups that became too radical, painting the world into one that had easy answers such as ‘It’s women’s rights so no man gets to have an opinion, ever’ and then living by that with a force that might damage more than it helped. I am aware, though, that this is not straightforward issue and particularly in the political climate that we have now, in 2017, I am once again grappling with the question whether radical means are the only ones that get anything done.

The kind of rhetoric that drove me away from the feminist community online...

what are you going to do if it's a boy
Anonymous
abortion :)
Ask brissaqnd a question #Anonymous

I heard this the other day and it's pretty accurate
The reason guys play video games all the time is because it is stimulating enough and holds a lot of cognitive attention to distract men from rape urges. It takes the "thrill" away for a while so they can control their testosterone and urge to rape.

#feminism #rape #misogyn #patriarchy

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Class 2: Subtle subjection

I think the argument that women should not be subordinate to men (as made by Taylor and Mill using utilitarian reasoning) is fairly accepted by now—at least in the mainstream in our ‘open’ Western societies (which does not mean that there are not plenty of people who still believe that women are/should be kept inferior). That does not necessarily mean equality is achieved, though. The problematic reasoning rather seems to have shifted from women are inferior and thus cannot be trusted with rights to women are not inferior, so they have been given equal rights, thus, feminism is now obsolete. It is not so much that people think women should not have rights, but rather, that they should ‘finally shut up about their damn rights.’

One could come to a conclusion like that because the mechanisms by which women are oppressed are much more subtle now, reflected in (possibly even unconscious) beliefs about, say, the jobs a woman should be doing. For example, Hilary Clinton (a woman!) was able to run for president (of course she could, women were equal in 2016 ...right?), but I still think that the sheer extent and spitefulness of the backlash against her—comments calling her “the devil” (Schultheis 2016) and “a demon from Hell” (Media Matters Staff 2016)—were due to internalized beliefs about women and their ‘proper place’.

The image of Clinton defeated like a mythical demon—Medusa, who wielded a power that was feared—is invoked here.

The male fear of destruction through women in power has a long history.
Class 4: The personal is political, but who said I want to be?

As we moved into second-wave feminism in the lecture, the slogan “The personal is political” gave me a lot of thought. It is great, on the one hand, that in calling personal issues political, they can be made aims of and can profit from collective action. On the other hand, I thought, does the slogan not also put a lot of pressure on women? If feminism has implications for our personal lives, then our personal lives also have implications for feminism—as a woman, my life is a feminist issue whether I want it to be or not. Does that mean I need to take implications for the feminist cause into account with every personal decision; taken to an extreme, does that mean, for example, that I

(Male) artists, for instance, frequently sought to represent this anxiety; e.g. in Gustav-Adolf Mossa’s painting *She* (1905), the demoness sits triumphantly on a pile of massacred men. The connection between female sexuality and male anxiety and the issue of the female being highly sexualized for the (male) gaze even when portrayed as a powerful monster also come to mind when viewing the painting.
am wrong to wear traditionally feminine clothes because they reinforce patriarchal beauty ideals?

Class 5: Dear Ijeawele

...is the title of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s recently published feminist manifesto, which, at first glance, is obviously different from the texts we examined in class: it is written by an individual, a well-known one at that, rather than a collective, it does not (overtly) conjure up images of a utopian future, and seems altogether to be expressing a less radical form of feminism (e.g. doesn’t call for militant action). It is, nevertheless, quietly powerful and that is, in my opinion, because it blurs the lines between manifesto and letter.

It is written for a specific individual and portrays this unapologetically by alluding to names/places/events unknown to an ‘outside’ reader, but at the same time it is made public. Since it is written primarily for a friend, it is written in a polite, loving tone, but at the same time it is declarative, unambiguous and direct, and therein develops its power. In writing lovingly about a little girl and the impact feminism will have on her life, Adichie forces readers to think about feminism (which, with its many
theories, can sometimes be very abstract, as she herself says in the manifesto) in a humanized way, while at the same time making it clear with the directness of her language that this little girl is owed equality.

Class 6: Power problems

What the extract from bell hooks shows to me is something that also came up in Adichie’s manifesto: We must be careful not to make the oppressed into saints, but to just look at them as—equal—people. Suffering systematic injustice in one regard does not automatically sensitize you to notice the struggle of all other oppressed groups—white women are not exempt from being racist because they are women and black men are not exempt from being sexist because they are black.

As bell hooks so eloquently demonstrates, intersectionality is vital in movements aiming toward progress; even when we are fighting to empower ourselves, we must be careful and look around whether there may be others who are made powerless by us. We should continuously seek out and incorporate different perspectives if we want to
create a social justice movement that really does create social justice. Such a movement has to be a movement that listens, rather than a movement that tries to silent.

“Feminism is worthless without intersectionality and inclusion.”

Class 7: Cross-dressing as a feminist act

Butler’s writing on cross-dressing makes me think of some of Dr. Victoria Flanagan’s (of Macquarie University, where I recently spent my semester abroad) research\(^1\) in which she discusses how cross-dressing performed by women in works of fiction in order to secretly get access to a part of society somehow reserved for males (e.g. Maid Marian in many modern adaptations of the Robin Hood story) can be read as feminist in an interesting way. When such characters overtly practice how to blend in among men in these stories, the performative nature of gender is emphasized.

\(^1\) as explained by her in a class
I think Butler’s point about socially constructed gender actually influencing biological sex might be made here, too: Acting ‘masculine’, in my understanding, has a lot to do with being comfortable with taking up space and expressing confidence, e.g. through a more broad-shouldered and wide-legged stance and bigger strides when walking. A confident stance, then, is also more solid and thus harder to push over; by acting strong we actually become strong, in a way.

A fairly recent example: the 2006 romantic comedy She’s the man. Though ultimately unchallenging in many other ways (the conventionally attractive, heterosexual white couple ends up together in a monogamous relationship etc.), it does humorously portray Amanda Bynes’ character’s attempts to act like a “hunky dude”.

Class 8: The queer female vanishing—act

What was truly new to me was the tension between feminism (and also lesbian feminists in particular) and queer studies; that is, the disappearance of experiences that are specifically female under the all-encompassing label of queer (a point as made by Sheila Jeffreys). In this criticism the need for intersectionality—acknowledging that it makes a difference whether you are gay and a woman or not—is once again made apparent.
In addition, it becomes clear just how hard structures of power are to shake. Even in a group formed specifically to go against the grid and overcome suppressive norms, the power dynamics of patriarchy are, it seems, retained. Queer theory would seem to suggest that in the queer community all are equal in their difference; however, difference does not equal difference.

In its attempts to dismantle existing normativity, has the queer community unwittingly created its own?

Class 9: Burkini ban

Discussions of postcolonial and transnational Feminism for me bring to mind the recent and rather controversial ‘burkini ban’ in some parts of France, which went viral and sparked much discussion about gendered islamophobia, and sexism. As Arundhati Roy puts it: “Coercing a woman out of her burka is as bad as coercing her into one. It’s not about the burka. It’s about the coercion.” (2016). I can agree with this argument but have to admit that I remain sceptical of the burka/burkini and the general notion of modesty as an ideal in dress, simply because I cannot really see how the notion that a woman (and not a man!) needs to wear a gown that hides the body is not somehow inherently objectifying the woman. I am happy to be taught otherwise, though.
I would not shame a woman for her choice or force her out of it and respect her various thought processes behind the choice, but I do think we (as feminists) still need to develop a way to sensitively address the norms or codes that are being perpetuated by a piece of clothing like the burka/burkini (or any other religious or cultural practice) without inadvertently becoming imperialist or being immediately called xenophobic. Simply banning a burkini—that much is clear—is, however, painfully misguided.

Through ‘Western eyes’ this may look like oppression, whereas for a Muslim woman it may be her first time to enjoy free movement in the water. Even though I think we should be allowed to criticize the idea of ‘modesty’ that this outfit might stand for (the burkini creator herself says that she wanted to create something that a girl can wear and be “modest” (Zanetti 2016)), we need to be sure to incorporate Muslim women’s points of view rather than acting only based on our own.
Class 10: The plight of transgender women

Julia Serano argues that transgender women are discriminated against not based on their non-conformity to the gender binary, but rather because they are born into male privilege and choose to lose it, opting to live as a woman and act feminine instead. I would also add, though, that we need to remember the particular scorn that transgender (or transsexual) women receive from people (unfortunately also some feminists) who treat them like ‘males in hiding’. This is particularly relevant now that the Trump administration has made moves like dropping the Obama administration’s lawsuit against North Carolina’s discriminatory bathroom bill. Such discriminatory legislature is frequently justified by republicans with the argument that transgender women are actually men trying to prey on ‘real women’ in the bathroom. Thus, transgender women are tragically made to suffer both for supposedly being male and for being female.

One of the most visible transgender women today, Laverne Cox chooses to present herself in a very feminine way. Might this be another potential struggle for transgender women: do they, after choosing to change their biological sex, have to be hyper-feminine in order to ‘pass’ as women in society? If a transgender woman chose to wear a more tomboyish style, would she be subject to comments like ‘I guess you’re a man after all’?
I am starting to wonder more and more about the connection between the crisis of masculinity and the rise in populism. I cannot help but feel disconcerted when I look at pictures from Trump rallies or TV footage, e.g. from the inauguration, and notice that his audience consists predominantly of white men. I do not want to deny that these men have had sufferings and class struggles and have logical reasons for their decision, but there is still something irritating about a group that has consistently suffered the least oppression considering themselves “forgotten” (Davidson 2017) and voting for a man who is going to benefit, if anyone, only them. Maybe these men have found themselves disenfranchised and thus tried to reinstate the status quo by voting for a cissexual, heterosexual, white, rich male, someone who can potentially return the world to its supposed ‘natural order’—maybe not even realizing that their thriving under said order was due to multiple privileges invisible to them.

Björn Höcke of AfD, to name another example, literally said: “We need to rediscover our masculinity, for only if we rediscover our masculinity, will we become manly. And only when we become manly, will we be able to fight”² (Stokowski 2015). We need to find effective ways to renegotiate such problematic notions of masculinity.

² Translation is mine. The original reads: „Wir müssen unsere Männlichkeit wieder entdecken. Denn nur wenn wir unsere Männlichkeit wiederentdecken, werden wir manhaft. Und nur wenn wir manhaft werden, werden wir wehrhaft“.
Class 12: Resurrection?

As we covered in class 12, feminism was declared dead or obsolete by many at the millennial turn. Now, roughly twenty years later, I wonder if we can’t safely call ourselves witnesses to its resurrection. With women’s rights issues becoming painfully visible once again, particularly on an international scale (see refugee women or, even more recently, the reinstatement of the global gag rule), and the rise of populism with its apparent desire for a return to conservatism, including ‘putting women in their place’ we can also see the movement gaining momentum again.

I see it in the Women’s March on Washington with its many international solidarity marches, some of them in the most unlikely places: I also see it international interventions against legislature that is dangerous for women, for instance, the Netherlands’ creation of an international safe abortion fund in response to the renewed global gag rule. And finally, I see it in the international reactions of outrage that are propelled by social media and even come from political agents on an international scale (see example below).

One of my favorite Women’s March photos: solidarity ‘march’ in Antarctica
Snapshots from the solidarity march in Frankfurt

The image that fuelled outrage: Trump’s signing of the anti-abortion bill, or, a room full of men decides over women’s bodies...

...and a reaction from Sweden. Their deputy PM is shown signing a pro-climate bill in an image which many have guessed ‘trolls’ the one above.
Sources


Images


Swedish deputy PM Isabella Lövin signs off a climate bill in a room full of women. 3 Feb. 2017. *Twitter*.


