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Book review: Angela McRobbie *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*

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‘The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change’ by Angela McRobbie. Published 2009 by Sage, London.

Reviewed by Stephanie Taylor, The Open University.

3 February 2010

In the late 1970s, when I had just moved to London, I was shocked and fascinated by my first sight of an enormous advertising poster on the steps down to the Underground. The poster showed twin sisters, probably in their late teens or early twenties, who were dressed in thin body suits, like winter underwear, and thigh-high, sheepskin-trimmed boots. The lower part of the poster, reachable from the steps, was half-obscured with stickers which announced that this image insulted and exploited women. My shock was at the sophisticated and blatantly erotic qualities of the poster photo: the swashbuckling boots, the dress and undress, the creepy nursery associations of the body suits and the way the sisters were playfully embracing. My fascination was with the unseen, admirable others, sisters of another kind, who had organised themselves to protest and must have stepped out from the crowd clattering down the steps in order to reach up and plant their home-printed stickers.

A couple of years ago, I noticed a later version of that same poster, probably featuring even younger models but now almost unnoticeable among the ubiquitous sexualised images used in contemporary ads. Certainly no one bothered to deface it. Angela McRobbie’s new book, ‘The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change’ (McRobbie 2009), discusses the period which broadly corresponds to the interval between those two advertisements, and the complex processes through which such images ceased to be remarkable (or at any rate, remarked upon) and feminist

political protest came to be dismissed as irrelevant 'political correctness'. She rejects the argument, exemplified in Sylvia Walby's notion of gender mainstreaming, that second wave feminism has been rendered obsolete by its own successes: McRobbie calls gender mainstreaming 'a respectable version of feminism, 'made-over' for approval by global governance' (p.154). She also criticises the characterisation of feminism in terms of 'first wave', 'second wave' etc. because this similarly contributes to an over-simple 'linear narrative of generationally-led progress' (p.156).

Hostility to feminism is not new: McRobbie points out that it has been continuously attacked and undermined since the late 1970s, particularly by the new right in the US. The kind of feminist activists who organised themselves to print and distribute those protest stickers for defacing poster ads are now typecast as 'hysterical', 'monstrous' and man-hating, an image which, McRobbie suggests, discourages young women from political involvement. This typecasting also, of course, ignores the point that the feminist activists and poster-defacers of the 1970s included men: McRobbie suggests that an additional contemporary problem is that the connections which once existed across different social movements and struggles, including labour movements, feminism and anti-racism, have been severed in a process which she calls 'disarticulation'. Its particular force derives from the idea that 'there is no longer any need for such actions' (p.26: emphasis added). And she points out that in the same way that political feminism has come to be seen as obsolete, there is now a widespread assumption that 'the fight for racial equality is no longer relevant' (69). Advertisements use fewer images of Black/Asian women, reasserting the dominance of whiteness, but this situation too goes mostly unquestioned and undiscussed.

McRobbie's argument is that the 'historicising' of feminism is part of the process through which it has been marginalised and undone. This 'undoing' of feminism is not a benign development but a response from 'those bodies and institutions and organisations which do not wish to see established power and gender hierarchies undermined' (p.2). We are in a situation of post-feminism: 'a kind of anti-feminism, which is reliant, paradoxically, on an assumption that feminism has been taken into account.' (p.130). McRobbie's call is for a new political feminism, and a recognition that some of the achievements of past feminist struggle, for example, in the area of women's education, are now threatened.

The images in advertisements are central to McRobbie's argument. She is interested in the 'cultural forms' (p.27) which address or interpellate young women, positioning them as individual 'subjects of capacity' (p.72), that is, as independent and free to make choices and plan their own lives, while at the same time requiring them to monitor and perfect themselves. This is a gendered version of the kind of 'contemporary regime of the self' discussed by Nikolas Rose (Rose 1996) (p.2). A particular source of such pressures towards women's self-regulation is, of course, the part of consumer culture which McRobbie calls 'the fashion-beauty complex' (p.69). Her concern is with the fashion and beauty industries as part of Western and globalised economies, and with the governments, including New Labour, which need the participation of young women within those economies, both as workers and as consumers. She suggests that it is this larger importance which has given rise to the new sexual contract by which young women are enjoined 'to work, to gain qualifications, to control fertility and to earn enough money to participate in the

consumer culture' so that these forms of participation 'in turn ... become a defining feature of contemporary modes of feminine citizenship.' (p. 54)

McRobbie also rejects a position which she had herself previously supported (including through her research on girls' magazines), that the larger forces of consumer culture can be subverted at the popular level of 'ordinary women, or indeed girls, who created their own, now seemingly autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity from the goods made available by consumer culture (e.g. television programmes like *Sex and the City*)' (p.3). Just because you like it, doesn't mean it's not perhaps bad for you or that you can be excused for thinking about the bigger picture. This is also, of course, an argument against enjoyment as sufficient rationale for more serious 'licensed transgression' (p.90), such as binge drinking and casual sex. McRobbie suggests that the supposed freedom for (some) young women to behave as badly as men not only has negative practical consequences, for example, in terms both of health and the possibility of 'old-fashioned sexist insults and hostility' (with additional, unrisk-able penalties for Black and Asian women); it is also another situation in which apparent choice is actually constrained. In this value system, sexual freedom is good, but the pregnancy which may result is bad, especially if it occurs when the woman is too young or outside marriage. And lesbianism is very bad. The old gender hierarchies persist, the status of the heterosexual married couple must be preserved, and a young woman who becomes an unmarried teenage mother is particularly vilified because she has also limited her economic participation as both worker and consumer.

'The Aftermath of Feminism' is a demanding but inspiring read. McRobbie locates her work in the academic areas of sociology and cultural studies. Her discussion of films ('Bridget Jones' Diary', 'Working Girl') and advertisements is informed by Lacan, Bourdieu and, most importantly, Judith Butler. *Feminism & Psychology* readers may relate her arguments to different sources. For example, the discussion of 'the new sexual contract' has strong parallels with Rosalind Gill's 2008 article for this journal (Gill 2008) in which Gill also discusses representations of young women in contemporary advertising and the 'new constructions of gendered subjectivity' through which 'sexual agency' may be 'a technology of discipline and regulation' (p.35). (Gill and McRobbie do reference each other, although not these specific sources.) McRobbie's discussion of 'female individualisation processes' and the ways that disadvantage becomes 'personalised' (p.77) recalls Valerie Walkerdine's account of one her research participants, a young woman desperately attempting to manage her career by interpreting constraints given by society as personal failures to be overcome through additional effort (Walkerdine 2003). McRobbie's concept of 'disarticulation' is from Stuart Hall's 'articulation' which, in McRobbie's summary, is 'Predicated on a post-structuralist and psychoanalytic understanding of identity as never transparent, never fulfilled or authentic, and never wholly corresponding with the structural categories of class, race or sex, ...[so] that lived social identities were always formed from a range of unstable and historically contingent elements.' (p. 25). This is, of course, the understanding of identity which informs a good deal of psycho-social work and (without the psychoanalytic theory) critical discursive psychology, including the work of Margaret Wetherell and Wendy Hollway.

In addition, many *Feminism & Psychology* readers will recognise the quandary of the 'feminist classroom' (p.150) described by McRobbie, in which the academic encounters large numbers of international students for whom study in a UK university is an entry point to a potentially exploitative international labour market. Finally, the nature of psychology itself makes this book especially relevant. We are aware of the individualistic theories within the discipline, its close links to therapies which normalise self-monitoring and perfection projects (Rose 1989), and in addition, its status, increasingly, as a women's subject. McRobbie refers to 'training as life coaches and degrees in psychology' (p.143) as new forms of cultural capital. The courses we study and teach have close links to the gender positions associated with the new sexual contract and women's participation in contemporary consumer culture. McRobbie's book is a call to a new political awareness and debate about our responsibilities as psychology academics.

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