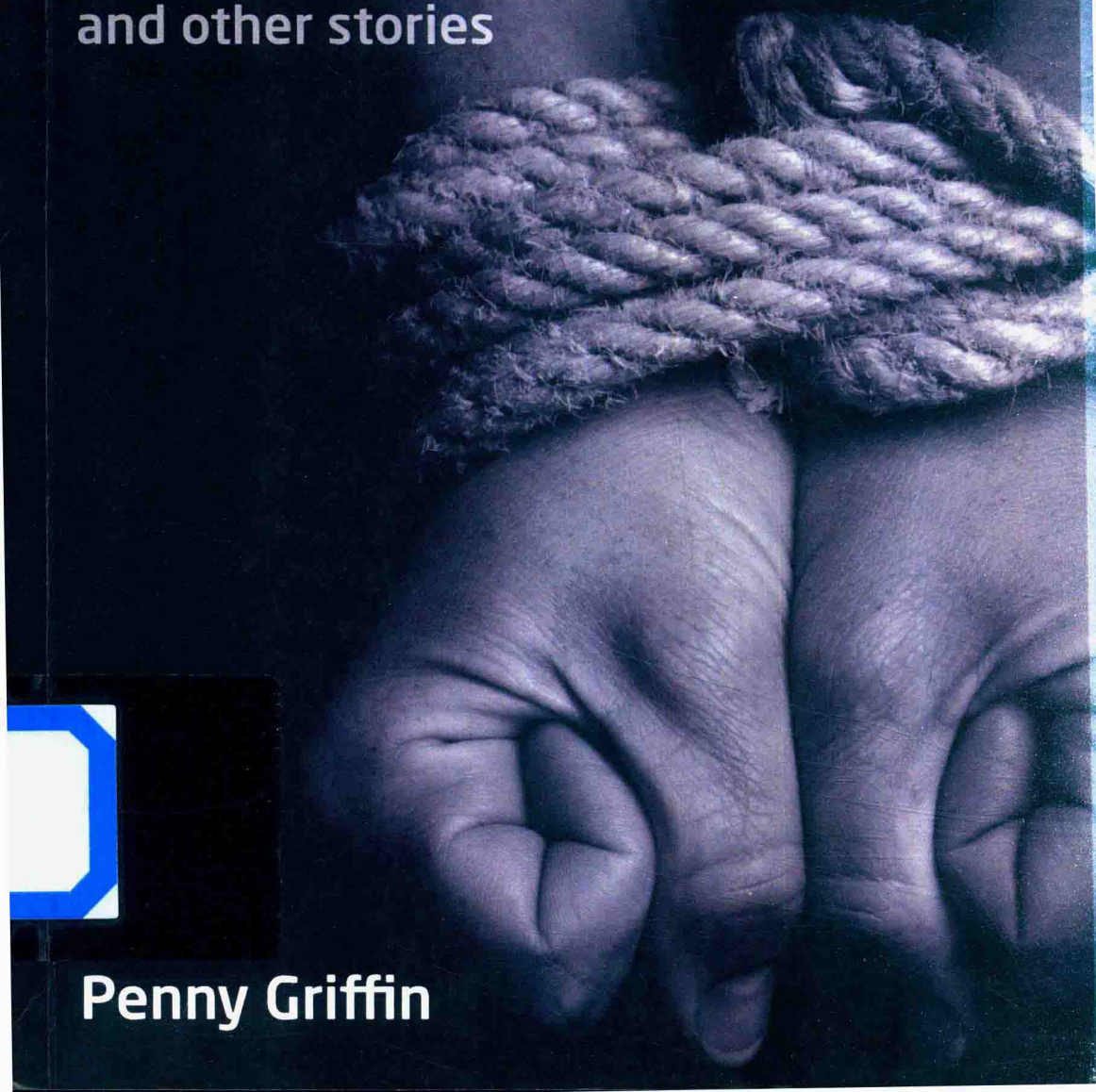
POPULAR CULTURE AND WORLD POLITICS

ROUTLEDGE

POPULAR CULTURE, POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE DEATH OF FEMINISM

Why women are in refrigerators and other stories



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Why is it so hard to come out as a feminist? In this innovative deployment of feminist curiosity Penny Griffin links together the supposedly disparate realms of international political economy and popular culture, showing how they work hard to make 'anti-feminism' the new normal.

Terrell Carver, *University of Bristol, UK*

Violence and male heroes are omnipresent in popular culture. In this innovative and important new book Penny Griffin reveals how they are part of much deeper entrenched and highly problematic gender stereotypes that shape both our identities and our politics.

Roland Bleiker, *Professor of International Relations, University of Queensland*

This is a book brimming with curiosity about the intricate connections between feminism, popular culture and IPE. Griffin has taken the time to weave an accessible and lively path between the 'popular' and the 'academic'. Highly illuminating and energising.

Marysia Zalewski, *School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Scotland*

POPULAR CULTURE, POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE DEATH OF FEMINISM

A number of scholars have examined the marginalization of feminist concerns in contemporary Western societies. They have articulated how representations matter to people's ideas, assumptions, perceptions and beliefs about the world, carefully connecting the world of 'make-believe' with the serious business of world politics. They have sought to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression and have revealed how feminist concerns have been appropriated and absorbed by institutions that contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. Some have argued that we live in a 'postfeminist' era that renders feminism irrelevant to people's contemporary lives.

This book takes 'feminism', the source of eternal debate, contestation and ambivalence, and situates the term within the popular, cultural practices of everyday life. It explores the intimate connections between the politics of feminism and the representational practices of contemporary popular culture, examining how feminism is 'made sensible' through visual imagery and popular culture representations. It investigates how popular culture is produced, represented and consumed to reproduce the conditions in which feminism is valued or dismissed, and asks whether antifeminism exists in commodity form and is commercially viable.

Written in an accessible style and analysing a broad range of popular culture artefacts (including commercial advertising, printed and digital news-related journalism and commentary, music, film, television programming, websites and social media), this book will be of use to students, researchers and practitioners of International Relations, International Political Economy and gender, cultural and media studies.

Penny Griffin is Senior Lecturer in International Relations in the School of Social Sciences, UNSW Australia.

Popular Culture and World Politics

Edited by Matt Davies (Newcastle University),
Kyle Grayson (Newcastle University),
Simon Philpott (Newcastle University),
Christina Rowley (University of Bristol), and
Jutta Weldes (University of Bristol)

The Popular Culture World Politics (PCWP) book series is the forum for leading interdisciplinary research that explores the profound and diverse interconnections between popular culture and world politics. It aims to bring further innovation, rigor, and recognition to this emerging sub-field of international relations.

To these ends, the PCWP series is interested in various themes, from the juxtaposition of cultural artefacts that are increasingly global in scope and regional, local and domestic forms of production, distribution and consumption; to the confrontations between cultural life and global political, social, and economic forces; to the new or emergent forms of politics that result from the rescaling or internationalization of popular culture.

Similarly, the series provides a venue for work that explores the effects of new technologies and new media on established practices of representation and the making of political meaning. It encourages engagement with popular culture as a means for contesting powerful narratives of particular events and political settlements as well as explorations of the ways that popular culture informs mainstream political discourse. The series promotes investigation into how popular culture contributes to changing perceptions of time, space, scale, identity, and participation while establishing the outer limits of what is popularly understood as "political" or "cultural."

In addition to film, television, literature, and art, the series actively encourages research into diverse artefacts including sound, music, food cultures, gaming, design, architecture, programming, leisure, sport, fandom and celebrity. The series is fiercely pluralist in its approaches to the study of popular culture and world politics and is interested in the past, present, and future cultural dimensions of hegemony, resistance, and power.

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Laura J. Shepherd

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Popular Culture, Political Economy and the Death of Feminism
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Motherhood, myth and women's political violence
Linda Ahall

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For Edie

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Tables

Boxes

PREFACE

In 2009, as I began writing this book, I was struck that, in popular terms, feminism appeared very much in decline, its actual popularity seemingly at odds with conservative critiques that chastised it for its lingering and baneful power. At this point, it seemed that the status of feminism and the increasing sexualization of popular culture in Western societies more generally were related, and related inversely. Sexually explicit content and demeaning representations abounded, yet feminism seemed submerged by popular rhetoric and representations that questioned its relevance and obscured its incisiveness. Feminists appeared on television, when they appeared on television, as shrieking harpies devoid of humour, even across cultural sources I otherwise admired and enjoyed. If feminism was suffering from an image problem, how, I wondered, had the representational practices embedded in our everyday cultural lives come to constitute and shape feminism and our responses to it? Were cultures of production and consumption in the West contributing to derogatory attitudes to women and, particularly, to feminism? To what extent were negative representations of the women's movement in the popular media depoliticizing feminism as a form of collective politics in a world where young women were being taught that discrimination had been eliminated and individual efforts, self-definition and choice were key to women's advancement? Why was sexism so prevalent across popular culture? Why could popular culture produce at best only uninspiring, and uninspired, representations of women, while sexism was *all* that consumer culture seemed to be selling?

Like feminists such as McRobbie, Whelehan and Levy, I was convinced that popular culture was indeed reproducing the conditions in which feminism was being dismissed and the sexualization of market products valorized. I found myself irritated, as I started this book, that a leading fashion house would be patronizing enough to claim that the images it used to sell its products were not 'real life' and that, as 'artists', well known and widely publicized designers had no social

responsibility (see Appendix B). During days spent teaching, it seemed that I only ever encountered students who insisted that they were not 'feminist', although, yes, they supported the projects espoused and achievements gained by the feminist movement and, no, they did not much care for the idea that they would earn more or less as graduates depending on their sex. When I began this book, I felt despondent; for the prospects of feminism in Australia, and for a future teaching apparently uninterested, desensitized, neoliberalized youth. Feminism did, indeed, appear 'undone' in the contemporary West, dismissible and irrelevant to young women's (and men's) lives and incompatible with a cultural landscape in which the sexualization of market products and objectification of the human body was valued above all else.

This book began, then, as a catalogue of sorts of the prevalence of discrimination, sexual violence, prejudice and asymmetry in the relations of power and authority that drive popular culture representations of women, men and children. Although I have long noted sexist and discriminatory practice across sources of popular culture (such as television, the internet, movies, music, books, and so on), it has only been relatively recently that I have come fully to appreciate the various levels of hostility generated by the 'f' word, both academically and across sites of popular practice. Some of the most vitriolic comments on feminism (and feminists), made so readily available now through the internet, have truly shocked, disgusted and disturbed me. I do not repeat the most profane in the pages that follow out of the fear that to reinscribe them is somehow to justify their presence.

When, in October 2012, Julia Gillard gave her now famous, if obviously crafted, 'misogyny' speech, and it seemed that, actually, not that many Australians were jeering, I was, then, quite surprised. This was not because women in Australia have not experienced sexism and would therefore not be encouraged by anything Gillard said in this regard, since Australia is undoubtedly sexist, and quite horribly so in some ways. I was surprised because I had begun to expect only disdain and sarcasm at the mention of feminism. I was well versed in student disinterest and celebrity denials ('I'm a humanist, not a feminist'), but, and it seemed almost sudden this change although on reflection it cannot have come from nowhere, people began publicly to admit that they might identify with the f word. Even my students started expressing an unprovoked (or possibly slightly provoked by me, but not consciously) interest in gender issues.

While my research has taught me that support for feminism appears cyclical, and thus potentially unstable, from something of an itinerary of failure, this book has evolved into a far more optimistic labour. This has surprised me. I have been even more surprised to find that there is little actual evidence (anecdotal or survey-based) to support any claim that young women, today, are less likely to support feminism or the women's movement than previous generations. Where only a couple of years ago I would likely have argued that young women were not as concerned with feminism as past generations, and that the, now rather clichéd, 'I'm not a feminist, but . . .' refrain was undoing feminism among my student cohort, examining in greater depth popular engagements with feminism has taught

me that people are rarely as naïve in their appreciations of relations of power as I might once have worried. Positive representations certainly jostle for space with disappointing caricatures and unflattering stereotypes, but, for every derogatory portrayal of girls, women, feminism or feminists, a genuine and affirming engagement emerges to lift the spirits. What I have found that seems more significant to feminism's future, today, is that young women learn, unsurprisingly perhaps, to fear and reject negative media representations of feminism and the women's movement. Such representations need only be relatively common: the power of stereotype threat and the considerable complexity in what women say about feminism is such that better attention is probably paid to considering feminist practice rather than what (young) women say about feminism, per se. While popular culture represents feminism, and feminists, in various and ambiguous ways, the contradictions involved in understanding contemporary popular culture's representational practices make conclusive statements on feminism's future impossible.

This research has invariably found it easier to uncover examples of antifeminism, both tacit and overt, filtered through multiple popular culture channels, than examples of patent support for feminism. Yet such examples are rarely enough to support definitively any claim that feminism is 'in decline'. Rather, writing this book has taught me that the so-called 'death of feminism' is entirely irrelevant to understanding either the complexity of social relations in capitalist, liberal societies such as Australia, or the significance of feminist imaginings within popular culture and popular culture imaginings of feminism. The important question today is not 'where has feminism gone?' but 'where is feminism embodied?' and the answer to this, I suggest, lies in understanding feminism as simultaneously vibrant and fragmented. It is this that makes feminism both vulnerable and enduring. While feminism's very fragmentation is ambivalent, rendering feminism incomplete to some and vital to others, to argue that feminism has many and various definitions, to different people, is not to vacate feminism of meaning; it is not, as per Kalb's analysis, to argue that the meaning of feminism is so scattered that, really, feminism means nothing at all. Often stigmatized and, sometimes, celebrated, however many times popular media have heralded, and will continue to herald, the death of feminism, feminism continues to relate in multiple ways to the different challenges people pose to sexist, hierarchical and restrictive practices, structures and institutions. People arrive at feminism, or they do not, for all sorts of reasons. Refusing to police the boundaries of the political and defining feminism according to its multiplicity constitutes part of the strength, not the weakness, of our engagements with the term.

I did not know, when I began this book, that I would fall pregnant and would have a baby girl. While the discriminatory and derogatory possibilities that my daughter will face alarm me, I am also, however, more confident than I once was that alternative possibilities exist and will be available to her. I comfort myself with the knowledge that, empirically, feminist leanings have been linked to self-esteem, self-efficacy, gender perceptiveness and academic achievement and I hope that she

learns as much from feminist practice as I have. Writing this book, I have learned (unconsciously, perhaps) to be less horrified by the shock tactics deployed by antifeminists, to expend much less emotional energy on the detractors and the hate speech, to feel sorry for the people that spend their time writing vitriolic nonsense and to be encouraged by those that seek to be a little different. Writing this book, I have been surprised by the diversity and prevalence of feminist messages across popular culture sites and I am, now, more sanguine about feminism's future, and more confident in the options my daughter will face as she grows up.

I am biased, of course, because I have always been inspired by feminist work. It has been feminist scholarship that has proved most instructive across my experiences of adult learning, from early engagements with Julia Kristeva and Simone de Beauvoir, to my current work on gender and the global political economy. I never felt as an undergraduate student that feminism might be considered a marginal, embarrassing even, subject area or mode of enquiry, a (now I discover) slightly unusual state of being that I perhaps owe to exceptional pedagogy during my studies. Feminists have, for me, always been the most astute commentators on social life, privilege, power and the production of (discriminatory) common sense. I have never really understood how people can claim to have made sense of the world, social relations or foreign affairs without thinking about the gendered restraints by which people everywhere are shackled.

Arguing that we ignore the significance of visual language in global politics at our peril, this book makes a case for centralizing analysis of popular culture in studies of international relations and political economy. Asking whether popular culture is contributing to a dismissal of feminism is a question worth thinking about because, more than simply being interesting, it is a question of the politics of power and the circulation (and regulation) of knowledge, exclusion and appropriate behaviour. Representations matter and the representational practices of contemporary popular culture help define our codes of conduct and horizons of possibility. While mainstream (conventional) International Relations and Political Economy frequently offer a picture of the world as a sequence of isolated events unrelated to everyday practices of social and cultural reproduction, this book instead proceeds on the assumption that we cannot understand the processes and forms of our social, economic and political activity without engaging the properties, biases and effects of the cultural systems in which we are located and that make 'real life' possible. Images and cultural constructions are intimately connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression: to understand their power is to begin to unravel the exclusive and discriminatory hierarchies that sustain them.

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Within international political economy, there has been a longstanding concern with examining the dynamics that conjoin popular culture and world politics. The focus has often been on how popular culture serves as a vehicle for the dissemination of dominant ideologies and/or how the structures of capitalism determine cultural forms. Thus, representations within artefacts themselves were understood as derivative of deeper underlying socio-economic structures. Popular culture simply reflected some other politics that was situated in some other place.

In this volume, Penny Griffin takes a different approach. She uses popular culture as a means of analysing contemporary feminisms from a perspective informed by international political economy. Her goal is to understand an important contemporary political paradox: how is it possible that as popular culture has become more overtly sexualisFed, popular rhetoric and representations have questioned the contemporary relevance of feminisms, portraying them as anachronistic vestiges from a bygone era of gender inequality that has passed? From this paradox, the analysis seeks to understand how cultural production is gendered so that particular understandings, meanings, and subjectivities that are hostile to feminisms emerge and circulate. The aim then is not to provide readings of popular culture that are read through feminisms but rather to see what popular culture tells us about contemporary feminisms, the politics of gender, and cultural political economy. Thus, throughout the book, we are confronted with the representational practices of popular culture that have made anti-feminisms more appealing, acceptable, and marketable for cultural producers and consumers. And we are introduced to new political subjectivities like the 'feminazi' and 'straw feminist' that emerge from these processes.

Griffin's focus is primarily on visual culture with an emphasis on those quotidian aspects that can be easily overlooked despite their ubiquity: advertizing, digital ephemera, and social media. But where the analysis becomes particularly innovative

is in its pursuit of the commercial logics underpinning their production. And what her analysis makes clear is that in the current historical period, market discourses and sexist discourses reinforce one another; producers point to the existence of objective market forces to justify decisions that contribute to the subordination of women while proponents of anti-feminism note that the popularity of sexist forms of representation demonstrates their broader acceptance. After all, as empirical work in the book demonstrates, often the most overt forms of misogynist sexualization are publicly justified on the basis of variants of the 'we're just having a laugh' defence. Thus, the book provides new insight into the politics of 'taste' and raises a troubling set of questions about the mores of neoliberalism.

By taking feminisms, political economy and popular culture seriously while also challenging traditional understandings of the spaces, processes, and relationships that produce them, Griffin makes a significant contribution to the study of popular culture and world politics. What this volume shares with others in this series is the firm conviction that popular culture matters politically. While it may be entertaining (and therein lies part of its appeal), if we are interested in how power and production contribute to forms of inequality – as well as forms of resistance to them – that are infused across the micro, meso, and macro levels of world politics, we must take popular culture seriously. This necessarily requires moving beyond an accounting of the allegorical properties of artefacts that can be mapped onto our preconceived notions of what world politics 'is'. Being serious means seeking to analyse how the popular culture-world politics continuum itself produces popular culture through practices of world politics and world politics through the practices of popular culture. In doing so, it is also a call to problematize the dividing lines that are assumed practically and analytically in contemporary IR scholarship between disciplines, locations of politics, methodological approaches, structure/agency, and production/consumption. In embracing the challenges of taking popular culture seriously and challenging arbitrary boundaries along the way, this volume is emblematic of the ethos of the series to better understand the relations of power that are productive of the popular, cultures, worlds, and their politics. Thus, for this reader, Griffin does partake in the forging of an international political economy more attentive to popular culture and more engaged with the ways in which markets, identities, and culture produce the relations of power that shape the private and public spaces of politics.

Kyle Grayson
March 2015

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Many people completed an extended survey from which this research draws and to which it refers. Their time, attention and careful comments were inspiring and provoking. Thank you.

This book relies on various examples of popular culture sources and artefacts. Many of these are in the public domain but thanks are due to those who have granted permission for their images and work to be used here.