The Future of Feminism

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Introduction

Feminism is not dead. This is not a postfeminist era. Feminism is still vibrant, despite declarations that it is over. Feminism is a success, although many gender inequalities remain. Feminism is taking powerful new forms, which make it unrecognisable to some.

Feminism faces new challenges in new times. As a result of success, feminism now engages with power and with government; yet mainstreaming gender equality into governmental policy produces tensions for feminism. As a result of successful mobilisation, feminist projects intersect with others, creating dilemmas over priorities. The development of neoliberalism, together with increased economic inequalities, de-democratisation, and an environmental crisis, creates the biggest challenge for feminism.

The future of feminism depends on responses to these challenges. There are alternative strategies to address such challenges – with implications for feminism, gender relations and the wider society.

Why Is It Said That Feminism Is Dead?

There have been many attempts to declare that feminism is over; that we are living in the 'aftermath' of feminism (McRobbie 2008); that this is now a 'postfeminist' era (Tasker and Negra 2007); that feminism has been co-opted by neoliberalism (Bumiller 2008; Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2009); or that feminism is in 'abeyance', surviving minimally in a hostile climate (Taylor 1989; Bagguley 2002; Grey and Sawer 2008).

Many reasons have been proposed as to why feminism should have ended. On one account, feminism would have been defeated by a

hostile 'backlash' that opposes, caricatures, misrepresents and ridicules it (Faludi 1991, 1992). On another, feminism would have faded away, becoming irrelevant in a new, post-patriarchal era, since it would have met its goals, so there would no longer be any need for it. Feminism would have been replaced by new gender projects, by 'girl power' and the new raunch culture (McRobbie 2008) – and these alternative gender projects are labelled 'postfeminist' (Tasker and Negra 2007). The explanations for the purported demise of feminism range from hostile backlash to its incorporation into postfeminist or neoliberal projects.

Feminism Is Alive and Vibrant

But feminism is not dead; rather it is alive and vibrant. Today a very wide range of activities designed to reduce gender inequality exists. Projects for gender equality extend across the domains of economy, polity and violence, as well as across civil society. They are highly varied, depending on social location. Feminism is local, national, European and international, and influenced by the global horizon.

Feminism is, however, less visible than before. This is partly because projects to reduce gender inequality less often label themselves as 'feminist', and partly because the form that feminism takes has been changing beyond recognition. Projects for gender equality are less likely to call themselves feminist when they exist in alliance or coalition with other social forces; they adopt instead a more generic terminology concerning equality, justice and rights. There is also pressure not to use a term that has been criticised, even stigmatised. New forms of feminism have emerged that no longer take the form of a 'traditional' social movement, being institutionalised instead in civil society and in the state. These new institutionalised forms are less recognisable as feminist by those who are accustomed to thinking of feminism as merely visible protest.

What Is Feminism?

There are different ways of approaching a definition of feminism. These include the self-definition of individuals, groups or projects as feminist; treating 'reducing gender inequality' as equivalent to feminist; and treating 'promoting the interests of women' as equivalent to feminist.

Self-definition is perhaps the most common approach. A person or project is feminist if they say they are feminist. This approach is consistent with the traditions of the early second wave women's movement in that it is based on a person's own experience. However, there are some difficulties here. The term 'feminist' is contentious – indeed even stigmatised. 'Feminism' is a signifier of something very particular and comes with additional meanings attached, which many seek to avoid. It has acquired connotations of separatism, extremism, men-avoiding lesbianism. This narrowing of the term is partly a product of a hostile opposition, in which feminism is caricatured and ridiculed in segments of the media. The phenomenon is hardly new ('bra-burning' has long been used as an adjective linked to feminism in this way).

This stigmatising of the term 'feminism' had its effects. It has led to the development of the phenomenon of the person who states 'I'm not a feminist but . . .', where the 'but' is followed by an endorsement of goals that are usually thought of as feminist, such as equal pay for equal work and the elimination of male violence against women. As a consequence, other terminology has developed that can be used to signify 'feminist' without resorting to the 'f word' (Redfern and Aune 2010), such as 'gender equality', 'equality', 'equal opportunities' and 'diversity'. There is a further issue concerning the positioning of anti-sexist men in relation to feminism. Even if such men support, and contribute to, feminist goals and projects, there is a question as to whether or not they can be described as 'feminist' on the conventional approach, since men do not usually experience inequality as a result of their gender.

An alternative approach to the definition of feminism is to consider people and projects that pursue the goal of reducing gender inequality to be feminist. This does away with the need for self-definition and for direct experience of gender inequality. There are many people and projects which declare that they seek to reduce gender inequality but do not normally use the label 'feminist'. There are feminists who do not like the connotations that have been attached to the term, but actively support the goals. For example, women who state 'I am not a feminist but . . .' do support feminist goals that would be included by using this alternative approach to definition. Then there are men who actively support the goal of reducing gender inequality but hesitate at adopting the term, not least because they do not want to claim the status of victims of gender inequality. They, too, would be included under this wider definition. There are groups and projects at the intersection of multiple inequalities, and projects

in which feminism and the reduction of gender inequality are just one strand, but not the primary one. It is not uncommon for projects and organisations that draw not only on feminism but also on other justice projects not to define themselves as feminist. Contemporary analysis and practice has promoted the development of intersectionality in practice and theory (see chapter 7). One of the consequences of such alliances and coalitions is that projects may not be named as feminist even when they have feminist goals. Coalitions of intersecting projects often use terms other than feminist, for example 'gender equality', or even just 'equality'. An example is that of trade unions that work towards equal pay, better promotion prospects, fair treatment, less harassment, and better regulation of working time – to be achieved for instance through maternity, paternity and parental leave – but for which feminism is not a primary purpose. Trade unions can contribute to the reduction of gender inequality; and, if they make this an important part of their activities, they would be included under the wider definition here. This second approach still requires a definition of gender inequality, which is itself subject to contesting approaches.

The goal of 'reducing gender inequality' offers a narrower definition of feminism than does a goal that extends to 'advancing the interests of women'. There are significant numbers of women's organisations which do not have the goal of 'reducing gender inequality', but rather of 'advancing the interests of women'. In any empirical study of feminism these groups are important, not least because they have so many members. The wider definition is particularly in use in the global South. In the global North, several national and international coalitions and umbrella groups include women's organisations that pursue the interests of women as they see them, but are not focused on reducing gender inequality. The approach to the domestic is often what underlies this distinction between women's organisations. In some forms of feminism, the emancipation of women from the domestic sphere, so that they can enter the public sphere and gain better access to education, employment and political representation, is a goal in itself. In other strategies to promote the interests of women, the protection and enhancement of their position in the domestic sphere, especially in domestic care work, is treated as an important objective. While some would not include this objective as feminist, others would. On the one hand, it can be considered to fall outside feminism because, even though it aims to improve the position of women, it also has a tendency to entrench existing gender divisions, which are unequal (Young 1990; Brown 1995). On

the other hand, it can be considered feminist in at least two ways. One is to include, within the concept of equality, the notion of equal valuation of different contributions or the promotion of the value of domestic care work, regarded as part of a maternalist feminist strategy (Koven and Michel 1990). A second way is to see this objective as a stepping stone along a route designed to improve the condition of women's lives that is likely to lead eventually towards gender equality – that is, to see it as the beginning of a strategy of 'transformation' (Fraser 1997; Rees 1998), for example, as the beginning of a development of the welfare state that can ultimately lead to wide-ranging changes in the gender division of labour (Bock and Thane 1991; Skocpol 1995). The development of one form of political practice or another depends on the social context, in particular the form of the gender regime. Defence of women's space in the home is more likely to be a progressive force for women under a domestic gender regime than under a public gender regime when most women do not derive their livelihoods from unpaid domestic labour. In the contemporary UK, and in most of the EU and US, most, though not all, women of working age derive a significant part of their livelihood from waged labour, since the transformation from the domestic to public gender regime is significantly advanced. This is not the case in the global South, where the main type of gender regime in many (though not all) countries is domestic (see chapter 6).

The definition of feminism in this book is inclusive. It includes some projects that do not define themselves as feminist, but nonetheless share feminist goals. It is focused on the pursuit of the goal of gender equality by individuals, groups, projects and governmental programmes, but it expands so as to encompass the wider goal of the advancement of women, on the grounds that both these goals require the project of the transformation of gender relations before they can be achieved. Projects that potentially contribute to this transformation are included in this book as 'feminist', even if their immediate goals appear to be more limited.

Is Feminism Global, Transnational or National?

Feminism takes different forms in different places, with diverse priorities and strategies; but there are major commonalities despite the variations. There is a question as to whether the commonalities are sufficiently great for it to be appropriate to write of global feminism – or, more modestly, of 'transnational' feminism – or

whether it is better to restrict the focus to nationally or locally specific forms.

Since feminism transcends national borders, not least by offering exchanges of ideas and practices across frontiers, the concept of 'transnational' feminism can be deployed (Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001). Further, there are important forms of feminist interventions at the level of the European Union, feminism thus crossing conventional borders between states within this polity.

The disadvantage of the phrase 'global feminism' is that it can make less visible important distinctions, and in particular it may elevate inappropriately the practices of those in dominant countries. However, there are important forms of feminist intervention at the level of the UN, both in the inter-governmental forums of its various agencies and also in the NGO forums that are attached to major UN conferences – such as the 1995 UN conference on women in Beijing, which produced the Platform for Action and the five and ten yearly reviews of the Platform in New York. Insofar as the UN is an instance of a global phenomenon, some aspects of feminism are global; but otherwise the term 'global' is used only with caution. The phrase 'global feminism' is restricted to those projects that utilise the UN as a location, either within UN bodies or where there are coalitions of NGOs that engage in its varied institutions. In other instances, the qualifier 'transnational' is more appropriate; in others, there is more specific reference to EU, national or local forms.

Projects, Governmental Programmes and Social Formations

A distinction is made between 'projects', 'governmental programmes' and 'social formations'. While each is a set of ideas, practices and institutions, projects are the least institutionalised, social formations the most, and governmental programmes fall in between (for more details, see Walby 2009). The concept of 'project' is particularly important in understanding contemporary feminism.

A 'project' is a set of processes and practices in civil society that create new meanings and social goals, drawing on a range of rhetorical and material resources. Projects are typically fluid and dynamic, as they attempt social change. Civil society is an arena of contesting projects. The concept of 'civil society' (drawing on Gramsci) is preferred to that of 'culture', since it does not assume homogeneity, stability or consensus, in contrast to the concept of 'culture', which often does. 'Project' is a wider concept than 'social movement', since

it can include groups and practices that are relatively stabilised and institutionalised, as well as ones that are more fluid and spontaneous. Feminism is more usually a project than a social movement in the UK, EU and US today. Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are active parts of civil society, but only a few would fall within the narrower concept of a social movement.

A 'governmental programme' is the set of policies that a government and its policy machineries pursue and that are institutionalised in governmental institutions, departments and ministries. In comparison with projects in civil society, governmental programmes are much better resourced; they have institutional, legal and material means to pursue their goals. Many, but far from all, projects aspire to become governmental programmes in order to be more deeply institutionalised in the social formation. While feminism is usually a project, it is coming to be increasingly embedded in governmental programmes.

The 'social formation' is constituted by the institutionalised practices in the four domains of economy, polity, violence and civil society. These institutional formations tend to be relatively stable over long periods of time, though there can be both gradual and sudden changes. In some writers, the concept of 'social formation' is replaced by that of 'society'. 'Social formation' is used in preference to 'society' because this concept does not assume that the boundaries of economy, polity, violence and civil society neatly map onto to each other in the same geographical space. Projects and governmental programmes usually seek to change the social formation. Long-lasting governmental programmes are often successful in this goal.

Gender Regimes

Gender regimes are systems of gender relations. The different aspects of gender relations are interconnected and form a system, named here a 'gender regime'. The forms of gender relations in the economy, polity, violence and civil society are interconnected in the sense that a change in gender relations in one of these institutional domains is likely to entail a change in gender relations in other domains. Gender regimes take different forms. The most important distinction is that between domestic and public forms of gender regime. Different varieties of the public gender regime can be found, including neoliberal and social democratic varieties (see chapter 6;

also Walby 2009). Struggles over the form of gender regime are an important aspect of feminist politics.

Neoliberalism and Social Democracy

Neoliberalism is characterised by attempts to limit the regulation of capital and markets in the economy, which thereby increase inequality and reduce the depth of democracy. Social democracy, by comparison, is characterised by attempts to deepen democracy so as to regulate capital, markets and violence in the interests of the majority of the population.

Neoliberalism and social democracy have been, variously, projects, governmental programmes and social formations at different times and in different places. There has often been a development from project to governmental programme to social formation, as the set of ideas, practices and institutions becomes more powerful and more deeply sedimented.

Neoliberalism and social democracy are two of the most important varieties of modernity: the contestation between them has marked the last hundred years of history in Europe and North America. There are other varieties, some of which were important historically while others appear to be of emerging significance – for example, fascism, state capitalism and communism (see chapter 6; also Walby 2009).

History of Feminist Waves

While this book focuses on contemporary and future feminism, there has been a long history of feminist activity, in a series of feminist waves. 'First-wave' feminism was a broad and deep project, extending from around 1850 to the winning of suffrage around 1920 in several countries in the 'West' (for example, 1918/1928 in the UK; 1920 in the US). While it is often remembered as winning the right to vote, this wave in fact addressed a wide range of issues, from employment and education to prostitution and married women's right to legal personhood (Strachey 1979; Banks 1981; Spender 1983; Drake 1984; Walby 1986, 1990; Skocpol 1995). Twentieth-century feminism was not only a western project; it was also part of nationalist campaigns for de-colonisation that often resulted in simultaneous suffrage for men and women at the moment of independence and in access to education for girls (Jayawardena 1986). There are

important similarities in the development of first- and second-wave feminism, despite their different contexts. The issues addressed have striking similarities, including access to good jobs (removal of barriers to top jobs); access to governmental power via democratic processes (presence in parliament); reduction of violence against women (legal entitlements to leave violent husbands); decrease in the sexual exploitation of women (against coercive prostitution). Both waves of feminism had a transnational reach, making connections around the world. Both waves used a range of organisational forms, including grassroots mobilisations in demonstrations, and local and national voluntary associations; but only the second wave succeeded in establishing units that promoted feminist goals inside government.

New Challenges for Feminism

Although feminism has successfully achieved some, though not all, of its goals, new challenges have emerged. There are three in particular: mainstreaming, as feminism engages with government; the intersection with allies and competing forces; and the intensification of the neoliberal context.

Engagement with Power: Gender Mainstreaming

Feminism faces challenges as a result of its successes. Feminist projects are becoming embedded in institutions of civil society and of the state and are being placed on the mainstream agenda of government. This is no separatist embrace of victimhood, protest or opposition. The success raises dilemmas of choice among priorities, of how feminism engages with government, with the mainstream institutions of power. Significant parts of contemporary feminism have gone beyond protest, to engagement with and potential deployment of power.

Such mainstreaming of gender equality projects raises its own set of dilemmas. In the tension between feminism and the mainstream, does the feminist project become integrated in a way that assimilates it to the status quo, or does it colonise, hybridise or mutually adapt with and change the mainstream? This tension between feminism and the mainstream is potentially productive for both, although it can, in some circumstances, lead to the fading of feminism as a distinctive force.

The 'mainstream' with which feminism engages takes multiple forms itself. It includes governmental programmes rooted in different ministries and departments, for example programmes for economic growth, crime reduction and health promotion. It can include mainstream projects, for example to achieve sustainable relations with the environment, so as not to overheat the planet. At the points of overlap there are opportunities for the inclusion and promotion of feminist goals within these mainstream agendas. These programmes and projects may be modified by feminism; both feminist and mainstream projects may mutually adapt, though in an asymmetrical fashion.

While gender mainstreaming has often been presented as a choice between the maintenance of the purity of separatist feminist projects and integration into the mainstream with a loss of all that is distinctive, there is an alternative approach. The most successful approach to gender mainstreaming involves maintaining a core of distinctive expertise and specialist politics while simultaneously dispersing such feminist expertise into all policy areas and into the work of normal policy actors. This dual approach to gender mainstreaming does produce tensions, but these can be productive.

Engagement with Intersecting Projects

A further challenge consequent upon feminist success is how best to engage with diverse political projects. Feminism has many potential allies with perceived interests in overlapping projects, and it also faces enemies and hostile projects. There are choices as to alternatives in these alliances and coalitions, in their priorities and in the rhetorical framing through which they are organised. The intersection of feminist projects with other political projects may involve relations of alliance or coalition. It can lead to the revision of existing projects or to the creation of new hybrid ones. These intersections will often involve negotiation over the priorities of the project that constitutes the outcome.

Feminism intersects with the green or environmental agenda. There are points of overlap among feminist and green goals that, potentially, are mutually supportive. Like feminism, this is a project that was once considered to be outside the mainstream, but in recent years has become increasingly incorporated into government programmes, albeit usually at the margins.

Feminism intersects with the justice projects of 'human rights' and

of 'social democracy'. Human rights have become more important as globalisation has proceeded, but they tend to form a relatively thin project of minimum standards. Social democracy offers a deeper analysis of the causes and remedies of global injustice, but has become weakened under globalisation and the neoliberal turn. Feminist goals have been expressed in terms of each of these justice frameworks, with different implications for how they are taken forward.

These projects have various degrees of success in engaging with the powerful forces of neoliberalism, financialisation, militarisation and fundamentalism. Feminism's engagement with these projects has implications not only for the form and success of feminist projects, but also for the potential success of these larger projects. Engagement with other projects involves not only a choice of alternatives, but also the potential synthesis of these projects into a new justice project, which should resonate even more widely. Feminism has much to offer to this potential synthesis. Future prospects are further discussed in chapter 7.

Neoliberalism and the Future

The intensification of neoliberalism over the last thirty years or so is a challenge for feminism. Neoliberalism entails increasing inequalities, especially in the economy, as well as processes of de-democratisation, as the democratic state is replaced by market principles in the organisation of major services. The neoliberal under-regulation of finance gives rise to periodic asset price bubbles, financial crises, and the expropriation of the taxpayer to bail out the banks and financial institutions that are 'too big to fail' (Krugman 2008; Stiglitz 2006; Walby 2009). The rise in inequalities and the shrinking of democratic spaces makes for a more difficult environment for the operation of feminism, which attempts to reduce inequalities and to deepen democratic governance.

It is possible that the financial crisis of 2008, with its ongoing repercussions on economies and societies, will lead to a tipping point away from neoliberalism. This might mean a turn towards social democracy and the democratic regulation of finance. However, it might also be a tipping point away from neoliberalism to fundamentalism, xenophobia and protectionism. Or the crisis may merely lead to the intensification of neoliberalism.

Feminist projects have an important contribution to make to the

construction of alternative futures. They have significance not only for the form of gender regime, but also for the form of capitalism and of the environmental crisis.

Content of the Present Book

Chapter 2 explores and refutes the arguments that feminism is dead, has disappeared or has become irrelevant. It examines the backlash against feminism, attempts to incorporate feminism in postfeminist forms and men's projects that attack maternalist feminism. It introduces the challenges that the neoliberal turn raise for feminism.

Chapter 3 identifies the range of activities in which contemporary feminism is engaged. Current feminist issues include not only those related to culture, sexuality and recognition, but also those related to the economy, to redistribution, equality, power and violence. The vibrancy of engagement with issues of equality in the economy is too often ignored in the literature on feminism. While varying with location, many feminist issues cross national boundaries.

Chapter 4 examines the new organisational forms that contemporary feminism is taking. Feminism is not only a social movement, but is now also deeply institutionalised, both in civil society and in the state. It is a mistake to imagine that feminism is dead because women are not demonstrating in the streets. New forms of feminism may not be very visible, but they are at least as effective as the old ones. Women are now inside many major decision-making institutions, from parliament to the police, though not as frequently as men. New forms of feminist politics involve constant exchange between state and civil society, new forms of coalition and alliance.

Chapter 5 discusses the challenge for feminism of its relationship with mainstream power, as feminism moves beyond autonomous activities and institution building. It discusses the productive tensions generated as feminism is mainstreamed – no longer separatist, but not fully assimilated or integrated; changing the mainstream and becoming changed by it in the process.

Chapter 6 situates feminist projects within the context of systems of inequality – within the gender and class regimes that structure women's lives, and within the developing environmental catastrophe that affects everyone. The chapter clarifies the meaning of 'gender regime' and identifies the variety of forms that it can take, and thus the different opportunities that are open to women. By providing an account of the causes of gender inequality and of its changing