Finn Mackay on Radical Feminism

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While still a niche movement, feminism has been enjoying an apparent resurgence across the UK since the early 2000s. Feminist activism is visible on the streets once again, and commentary and agendas are progressing in mainstream media in ways that have not been seen for decades. Marches such as Reclaim the Night attract thousands more than during the Second Wave of the 1970s and 1980s when feminism is last considered to have been at its height across the Western world.

My new book traces the herstory of the British Women’s Liberation Movement from the Second Wave, and compares the types, methods and motivations of activism and activists in the movement then, compared to those of the current resurgence. I surveyed and interviewed over one hundred feminist activists of all different schools or types, from Socialist Feminists to Christian Anarchists to Radical Lesbian Feminists.

The main changes I observed in the movement are a shift towards the inclusion of men in feminist organising and leadership, and an increasing professionalization or managerialism in the methods of activism. A previous, more do-it-yourself attitude, referenced by feminists of the 1970s, has given way to an unquestioned assumption amongst younger organisers that events must be policed and stewarded, that formal venues must be hired, that media training must be sought for spokespeople and that illegal activities are inappropriate, if they are even considered an option at all. The fraught fault lines which exercised the movement of the past, along the lines of race, class and sexuality have also shifted; fracturing into divisions over the inclusion of trans women in feminism, and a persistent though modern separation of those for or against the industries of prostitution and pornography.

Sadly, the motivations for participation in feminist activism remain remarkably similar; women recounted experiences of sexual harassment, discrimination at work, isolation in pregnancy and child rearing, as well as incidences of rape and other forms of male violence. Echoing work from urban geography and criminology (Condon et al, 2007; Thomas & Bromley, 2000; Stanko, 1990), younger women voiced concerns over their safety in public space, especially at night, and described the daily micro practices they engaged with in order to manage these concerns. While walking home at night, women carried their keys sticking out of their fists, pretended to be on the phone to a boyfriend, avoided enclosed bridges and underpasses completely, diverted to longer more well-lit routes, and walked in the middle of roads rather than on the pavements in order to bathe in the security of the arc thrown by street lamps. These realities of spatial segregation clashed with the accounts of older activists, who frequently assumed that younger women today must feel freer, due to them being more visible in the night time economy and in urban public space.
Younger women were hungry for and welcomed collectivity; they were generally positive about dedicated feminist spaces, whether these were open to men in some circumstances was still up for debate. Reflecting a backdrop of brutal neoliberalism (Baker, 2008; Duggan, 2003), not to mention an ongoing backlash against feminism as a social movement (Faith, 1992), women spoke about victim-blaming and isolation, feeling like they are the ‘only feminist in the village’ in their college, workplace or amongst their peers. Activists were spending a great deal of their own personal finances as well as physical and emotional labour on creating feminist spaces, only to be ridiculed and stereotyped by friends and colleagues. This ridicule took all too familiar forms, raising the spectre of the hairy-legged, extremist, man-hating, lesbian feminist (Scharff, 2010; Hesford, 2005; Rich, 2005). Despite the fact that most of my respondents identified as heterosexual, the majority of organisers recounted experiences of such anti-feminism in the form of homophobia.

There are horrible stereotypes, about feminists, you know; hairy, man-hating lesbians. Yeah, just that sort of thing is really frustrating, the associations of feminism” (Lucy, 24yrs. White. Heterosexual. Feminist).

“a lot of women would deny it, and they wouldn’t say there was any need for feminism and they would deny that they were ‘that kind of feminist’. And when I say: what’s ‘that kind of feminist’?, I get stereotypes. Oh one who doesn’t like men, and I think, where do you get this idea? Show me a feminist who doesn’t like men or women, we love each other: we just dislike what they [men] do as a group” (Samantha, 64yrs. White Irish. Heterosexual. Socialist Feminist).

“Women worry if they call themselves feminist then they might be seen as being lesbian and not shaving their armpits, you know. I think the battle against feminism has been quite insidious” (Fallon, 32yrs. White. Heterosexual. Radical Feminist).

My contention is that this type of misogynist and homophobic anti-feminism attaches particularly to one particular school of feminism and that is Radical Feminism. While there is no one definition of feminism generally, let alone the schools or types within it, I have previously defined Radical Feminism using four criteria. First, the acceptance of the existence of patriarchy alongside a commitment to end it. Second, the use and promotion of women-only space as an organising method. Thirdly, a focus on all forms of male violence against women and their role as a keystone of women’s oppression broadly. Fourth and finally, an extension of the analysis of male violence against women to include the institutions of pornography and prostitution. This list is by no means exhaustive and is purely my own interpretation and understanding of this school of feminism.

Radical Feminism often seems to serve as the vessel or totem which signifies a feminism gone too far, an extreme example of feminism and a destination at which no sane person would presumably wish to arrive. Scholars have commented on how feminist stereotypes generally are brought into being by the sort of frequent and universally recognised references that were detailed by my own research participants, as quoted above.

The stereotype of the ugly, man-bashing, lesbian feminist comes into existence through repeated reiterations and produces that which it seeks to designate every time it is named (Scharff, 2010:839). So common are these feminist stereotypes, they almost go unquestioned, including by feminist academics.

[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 (Walby, 2011:3).

It is not enough to theorise how such stereotypes are brought into being through repetition, because to do so misses a very important point; which is that some of the labels used to denigrate feminism and feminists are not myth, but reality. Some feminists are lesbians, some are separatists, some choose not to remove their body hair and these political choices are valid and have a proud and powerful history. It does seem the case that such examples are, however, rare in the current movement, despite reference to them ironically being so omnipresent.

To accept or fail to comment on feminist stereotyping leaves intact the notion that there is something wrong with identifying as a lesbian, Lesbian Feminist, Separatist Feminist or Radical Feminist. Every time this happens, the feminist choices, activist choices and arguably the sexual choices of a new generation of feminists are limited and policed. Ironically, of course, this is the precise aim of those very stereotypes, to discourage women from a feminist identification, perhaps particularly a Radical Feminist identification. As activists, we must not aid the backlash in this quest, but instead must reclaim such so-called stereotypes as sterling and real examples of feminism at its finest.

References
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