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Feminism, generation and intersectionality

Alison Winch

Author Final Version

‘What can we do about white feminists claiming black feminists’ work as their own?’ ‘Why are you hung up on women and their wombs - it’s so heteronormative!’ These were some of the questions asked at the ‘Sisterhoods and After’ conference held at the British Library in October 2013. Younger feminists were challenging, as well as seeking advice from, a platform of older second-wave feminists. The speakers included, among others, Beatrix Campbell, Lynne Segal, Gail Lewis, Jocelyn White and Catherine Hall. Issues of race, class, sexuality and ability were foregrounded, and dis-identifications as well as connections were articulated. People in the audience, which was comprised of a cross section of ages, often disagreed with the women on the stage, but they also sought support, perspectives on contemporary culture and clarification on the speakers’ political alliances. Feminism was not a carefully handled torch being passed from one generation to another, but neither was age a barrier to conversation. Nevertheless, the issue of generation was connected to history, time and organisational questions in a quite specific way. The aim of this piece is to explore these issues further.

We are witnessing a resurgence in feminist activism. This had already begun to happen before the economic crash of 2008, but since then it has been gathering further momentum, partly in response to the disproportionate effects of the government’s policies on women. More women than men have lost their jobs in the UK, especially in the public sector, and the subsequent cuts to family benefits have severely affected the incomes of women. The slashing of the care system has primarily affected women, who do twice as much unpaid caring as men, and the gap in equal pay is widening as more jobs are lost. Single mothers’ income is set to fall by 8.5 per cent after tax by 2015.ⁱ In addition, the withdrawal of public funding from charities affects vulnerable women; for example, women’s refuges have seen their funding drastically reduced and many have been forced to close.ⁱⁱ

A further stimulus to increasing support for feminism has been the availability of an online platform for anti-neoliberal feminist voices which might otherwise have been ignored or ridiculed by the mainstream media. This means that many younger people have access to feminist ideas that could previously have eluded them. At the same time, the overt misogyny of the internet has made gender violence shockingly explicit. These factors, combined with other Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition policies, have remobilised and re-energised feminist collectives.

Generational mistrust and the new sexual contract

One problem facing intergenerational communication between feminists is what Ben Little describes as ‘the new class settlement’, in which class divisions are framed as generational,ⁱⁱⁱ and this is also an issue picked up by Lynne Segal in her 2013 book, *In Our Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Aging*. Ben argues that generational difference is manipulated by governments in order to create divisions, destroy collectives and deploy blame. This has the added benefit of associating second-wave feminism with the apparently privileged and selfish postwar generation.

A culture of blaming the baby-boomers - as evidenced for example in books by David Willetts and Neil Boorman - seeks to divert attention from socioeconomic problems that are driven by neoliberal policies.^{iv} Simultaneously, young people are witnessing the withdrawal of state aid in the form of higher tuition fees, the imposition of bedroom tax, decreased levels of housing benefit and the withdrawal of EMA; and at the same time they are caught up in circuits of debt and what David Graeber calls 'bullshit jobs'. Because young people tend not to vote and are alienated from the political process, governments can ignore them in terms of state aid and instead bribe the previous generation with pensions and fewer cuts.

Postwar social-democratic welfare provision was also divided along the lines of class, but, however imperfect its operations, it did redress prewar inequalities. And in the current attack on this whole settlement and its baby-boom generation - who are seen as having received 'privileges' - the government and its media complexes are trying to shift the blame for the crisis away from the financial corporations which caused the recession, and to domesticate politics as a family or generational issue. Framing the recession and its resultant cuts as familial is also a strategy to normalise young people's dependency on their parents when they can't afford to set up their own households. The alienation created by these policies and enforced by the media circumscribes potential alliances between feminists along the lines of age and generation.

Generational divisions are also gendered. Angela McRobbie argues that young women are urged to participate in a 'new sexual contract', in which they are promised equal participation in education, employment and consumer culture, as long as they abandon critiques of patriarchy and political radicalism. In return for this recognition, they must adhere to the entrepreneurial, self-managing and individualising logics of neoliberalism. Postfeminist culture frames feminism as no longer relevant, as a thing of the past, because 'gender equality' has become common sense.^v This is of course a 'mystique': its poster girls are middle-class, white, thin, heteronormative, able-bodied. And it is reinforced by the health and beauty industries, as well as the mainstream media, which fetishise a particular type of classed and raced youthfulness as a desirable commodity. Participating in this new sexual contract is likely to be self-destructive and divisive - not just because hyper-visibility is highly selective and short-term (it only lasts until youthful beauty fades), but because the lack of opportunities for reward throughout a woman's lifetime, now made worse by cuts to state provision, exposes the contract as a lie. And of course older women face a battle even to remain in contention. It goes without saying that divisions between women on the basis of age are detrimental to women's self-respect: we all get older.

Familial metaphors and the fight for resources

Familial metaphors, which are employed by both feminists and the mainstream media, generally tend to hinder communication between generations. The conference described at the beginning of this article was part of a project called 'Sisterhoods and After: An Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement', in which second-wave feminists were interviewed and their experiences, campaigns and visions for the future recorded. The phrase 'and After' implies a discomfort over the term 'sisterhood', and this allows the title to encompass the intensity of relationships forged in the second-wave movement but also to include the feminists who felt that

they were marginalised on the grounds of race or class. The term 'sisterhood' implies a universalism that never existed.

The use of familial metaphors in the mainstream media has also been a means of erasing anti-capitalist feminisms from history. Whereas 'sisterhood' was employed to describe second-wave collectives (as in Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* published in 1970), it was maternal metaphors that were used to distinguish the 'sisters' from their 'daughters' who forged the third wave in the 1990s. When feminists like Natasha Walter, Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfeld criticised the previous generation of feminists for being anti-consumerist and denying women sexual agency, they were embraced by a mainstream media that was keen to nurture a postfeminism that was complicit with capitalism, and to draw on divisive strategies that denigrated the socialist drive behind many of the second-wave collectives. Here, the use of maternal metaphors served to mask the way in which an anti-capitalist politics was being erased from popular memory. The media's consistent belittling of feminism was a means to silence the marxist, anti-colonial and anti-racist work of writers such as A.Y. Davis, Audre Lorde, Himani Bannerji, Selma James, Maria Mies and Dorothy Roberts, among others.

Though these divisions can be better understood as symptomatic of the relational trauma engendered by the marketisation of all areas of life under neoliberalism, feminists themselves have also seen generational conflict as an explanation for the problems afflicting contemporary collectives. In a 2010 article for *Harper's Magazine*, Susan Faludi maintains that there are 'seismic generational shifts' - with 'younger women declaring themselves sick to death of hearing about the glory days of Seventies feminism and older women declaring themselves sick to death of being swept into the dustbin of history'.^{vi} It is certainly true that many young women feel ignored, undermined and even attacked by more experienced women in professional contexts: in the neoliberal and sexist workplace, where everyone is fighting for resources, women have been known to resort to the Margaret Thatcher strategy of becoming queen bee. What this suggests, however, is not that women are divided along the lines of age, but that they are competing under conditions of precarity and scarcity. The divisions are drawn by those who manufacture that scarcity to protect their own privilege.

The passion of disagreement can be a catalyst for change, but - perhaps in recognition of this - the media is desperate to gloss feminist conflict as a pantomime. Women fighting have always provided titillating entertainment, their feminine pettiness justifying patriarchal control: look what happens when you leave women to their own devices! The media seeks to divide feminist collectives by appropriating and promoting feminists who celebrate corporate culture. Thus Sheryl Sandberg and Louise Mensch identify themselves - and are identified by others - as feminists, but they also espouse individualism, the heteronormative self as an entrepreneurial project, and hierarchy between women. While they do demonstrate a shift within the context of postfeminism, in that they argue that feminism is relevant and that gender equality still needs to be fought for, they do so within the context of the boardroom, and by espousing personal responsibility. Consequently they are courted by the media in a bid to circumscribe the meaning of feminism and silence the voices of grassroots and anti-neoliberal feminists.

Online activism and funding

Another tension in intergenerational communication between feminists is the perceived online/offline divide. Most young feminists first encounter and engage with activism online. Unlike older women, many activists first cut their teeth in feminist digital culture, and it is here that they develop their politics.

There is a wide and proliferating range of collective sites, blogs and online magazines, including in the UK *F-Word* and *Feminist Times*, and in the US *Jezebel*, *Feministing*, *Racialicious*, *Black Girl Dangerous* and *Bitch*. *The Crunk Feminist Collective* site forges sustainable feminist connections between men and women of colour; they make links between online and offline media and modes of feminist consciousness, as well as between scholars and activists. There are also a number of individual feminists who interact in wider social media networks and are active as bloggers and commentators. This is evident in campaigns like #Delhibraveheart, #hollaback, everydaysexism.com, among others. Influential bloggers include trans woman Janet Mock who runs #girlslikeus, and the queer Afrofeminist blogger and activist who writes the blog *Spectra Speaks*.

The internet has also allowed the forging of alliances between feminists across transnational contexts. Protests like *Slutwalks* and events such as the *LadyFest* have been replicated and experienced on a global scale. *Pussy Riot* give flash performances which they share through social media, especially YouTube and Live Journal. Because they are an anonymous collective they have issued an open invitation to feminists to join them. In response, performances and expressions of solidarity have been enacted in Europe and the US. These alliances demonstrate how transnational advocacy and protest are newly manifested through and by digital culture.

However, online activism faces acute problems, given that digital culture is primarily owned and monitored by corporations. Although younger women have been very visible in online media campaigning, they have been hindered by problems of resources and funding. Much feminist activism and debate must inevitably take place within - and often with the support of - corporations, most notably Google and Facebook. And branded spaces benefit from the unpaid labour of users, who participate in the creation of content, and also offer up lucrative data. All this produces ethical dilemmas about how to sustain a website and maintain feminist connections while being dependent on big business and advertisers: *Feministing* is reliant on advertising, as is *Jezebel* and many bloggers. Painful problems and dilemmas are generated as campaigners find themselves in direct competition over funding bodies, third-party advertising companies and other sources of income. Online feminism can therefore be seen as a site of privilege: the mainstream media's strategy of marginalising black and working-class feminists becomes replicated online.

The problems faced by *Feminist Times* usefully exemplify these issues. Its founder, Charlotte Raven, encountered acute generational mistrust when she aimed to reignite the 1970s and 1980s feminist magazine *Spare Rib*. Indeed the creators of *Spare Rib* engaged in a legal battle with Raven - still ongoing - so that she could not use the name. Then, when *Feminist Times* eventually began publishing, it was heavily criticised because, in order to be able to pay contributors and staff, as well as cultivate a brand-free space, a membership policy was set up to generate income through direct

debts. Retractors argued that this would alienate students and those on low income; and that it would be only accessed by a privileged few. In the end there were not enough members, and the project was forced to take a break after only a year.

Feminist Times may have made some dubious choices over their content when they first started, but the criticism levelled at them over their membership scheme would have been better directed at the pervasive corporate values that permeate online spaces. There is an expectation across political spectrums that digital publications are 'free', even though we pay for them with our data and spending potential, and by co-creating the content that we will never benefit from when the companies are sold. There seems to be a widespread belief that not-for-profit political organisations and collectives should give away their labour.^{vii} The culture around the exchange of digital labour needs to be radically rethought, and we need to develop sustainable models and sites of political campaigning that could enable this. After all, in the old days *Spare Rib* was partly subsidised by the Great London Council, and there was a price tag for each print issue. Intergenerational feminisms need to debate and construct ethical models of online publishing that do not rely on corporate PR and sponsorship.

Another significant problem facing online feminist writers and users is the virulent misogyny and racism that suffuse the internet. Trolls continually - and violently - attempt to intimidate, disrupt and shut down feminist voices in public spaces. According to Courtney E. Martin and Vanessa Valenti, concerns over trolling and funding mean that online feminist activism can be reactive and myopic, and there is a high rate of burn out. They argue that feminist movements need to engage in long-term strategising in order to forge sustainable modes of campaigning that can bring together different feminist collectives and sources of funding.^{viii} Simultaneously intergenerational feminisms should also include more established forms of political action, including taking to the streets and other offline collective protests, thus learning from the repertoire of 1970s feminists. The importance of this non-digital form of visibility is not to be underestimated.

Feminist genealogies

The Vagenda is an interesting example of a blog that has benefitted from the mainstream media's willingness to embrace feminists who are amenable to their values. It is run by two friends, Rhiannon Lucy Coslett and Holly Baxter, and is not funded by advertising, which means there is no payment for contributors or staff. Contextualising the women's magazines that they critique within contemporary socioeconomic realities for young people, *The Vagenda* satirises postfeminist popular culture in a hyperbolic and humorous manner, and the mainstream media have featured Coslett and Baxter in a number of interviews and other appearances. Square Peg, a division of Random House, has published a book of their work and *The Vagenda* recently participated in a feminist rebranding exercise with *Elle* magazine and Wieden + Kennedy advertising agency. (*Feminist Times* also took part in this scheme but they were much more critical of both the process, the limitations of women's magazines, and the concept of a feminist rebrand.) *The Vagenda* have been criticised by other feminists for their failure to give space to intersectional forms of oppression and refusal to engage in feminist theory. Their response is to insist that the blog is *funny*. They advocate 'just do[ing] whatever the fuck you want in your noble

quest for gender equality'.^{ix} Rather than engage deeply within a tradition of feminist thought, they celebrate the plurality of contemporary feminism:

One of the things I love (and I mean LOVE) about this new wave of feminism, is that it features a range of women campaigning on different, varied issues. A war on many fronts, if you will. I see it as progress, as the feminist movement moving on from a time where you were essentially supposed to sign up to some kind of bullshit feminist charter in order to join the club.^x

For them, if the term 'feminism' - however loosely defined - has a wider reach, then this is positive.

I sympathise with this approach as it might encourage sceptical would-be feminists to explore further avenues. However, the embracing of plurality can gloss over the power structures at work. It is dangerous not to engage with the histories of feminism that can help us to recognise and understand why particular feminists and their campaigns have garnered more visibility and therefore helped to power hegemonic culture. This is not necessarily the fault of individual feminists, but there needs to be an acknowledgement of the ways in which wider political structures and media complexes - including publishing houses like Random House - privilege certain feminist figures and ignore others.

The Women's Liberation Workshop (1970) - the first nationally recognised feminist conference in the UK - rejected a structure based on leaders, instead opting for basic units within a heterogeneous federation. But in reality some leaders rose to the top and certain privileged feminists eclipsed the others. As Jo Freedman argued at the time, assertions of structurelessness can be tyrannical, because they mask those who actually wield power. Then, as now, specific feminisms can accommodate capitalism and these subsequently come to be seen as the dominant feminist discourse. Not being aware of this history is problematic. It means operating from what Jeremy Gilbert has termed a 'year zero mentality'; he argues that because so much contemporary radical activism takes place online there often isn't an institutional memory from which political groups can draw.^{xi}

Anti-capitalist feminisms

It is unproductive to argue over who are or are not 'real feminists'. Instead I am arguing here for an intergenerational and left-wing feminism. There may be the potential for alliances with neoliberal feminists - and others - over, for example, the freedom of choice in relation to abortion. But there also needs to be a robust anti-capitalist feminism that takes on the inequalities (frequently gendered) which are created in an aggressive market society.

Although women have liberated themselves in many ways since the 1970s, most notably in terms of sexuality and the workplace, today they are struggling under harsh new conditions under the surveillance culture of neoliberal patriarchy. There are more women in the workplace and in positions of leadership, but their privilege is often achieved on the backs of other women's low paid labour. Even if some women - like Sandberg and Mensch - are able to rise to the top of their profession, they cannot do so without working-class women doing their household's childcare and domestic chores so that they don't have to, and so they don't have to address the gender

inequalities in their own personal relationships. Indeed, we are witnessing a greater divide between women along the lines of class, and therefore of race and ethnicity.

Furthermore, if they are to avoid being complicit in the oppressive forces that subjugate women from the global South, intergenerational feminisms must also be actively anti-colonialist. Contemporary neoliberal capitalism violently exploits women across the globe in order to supply consumers with cheap clothes and other goods. Moreover it important to contest the ways in which representations of women from Arab states are used by the UK government and its media complexes in order to justify an aggressive Crusader-like foreign policy. Simultaneously, these women become its victims in war.

Socialist and marxist feminists have long argued that capitalism and colonialism oppress women. Their voices need to have a wider reach, so that younger feminists are more able to engage with and incorporate their ideas and experiences within their own activist networks; academics and activists who have been developing anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal systems of thought and ways of living since the 1970s need more accessible platforms so that they can be heard. Crucially, intergenerational dialogue is needed to rescue memories of a time when it was possible to conceive of the British state as being capable of regulating corporations and forging a more equal future - something that younger feminists and left-wing activists find it difficult to imagine.

The Scottish referendum revealed acute generational distrust of the current establishment: most of the young people who voted did so for independence. And there are many other campaigns involving a new generation. There is a strong global movement towards local and regional devolved structures of power, and in this networked society activists are revisiting cooperative systems of living and working. In tandem with technological changes, activists are exploring and revising the possibility of coalitions around ecological and entrepreneurial alternatives to big business, as well as aiming to forge strong ties with unions. These movements offer spaces that are ripe for the forging of anti-neoliberal strategies; and connecting with genealogies of feminism, its spaces and languages of debate, its anti-capitalist roots and manifestos, would offer them assistance and resources.

At the 'Sisterhoods and After' conference it was clear that issues of race and sexuality are still raw, painful and crucial issues for young women within feminist collectives. Many of the younger respondents contested biological notions of womanhood, which they felt excluded those who identify as transgender or intersex, as well as those who reject heteronormativity. This isn't to say that second-wavers are not sympathetic to these ideas. Indeed, some of the antagonism over sexuality generated at the conference was based on misunderstandings between the audience and the speakers: it was an intergenerational miscommunication. Nevertheless, it is important to note that intergenerational feminisms will only be effective if trans and intersex feminists are actively included and their voices are made to count. We need a paradigm that allows us to lucidly unpack the antagonisms that are created and reproduced through intersectional difference, as well as the inequalities engineered by capitalism; such a framework will help us to conceive of alternative political structures.

Intergenerational feminisms

In November 2014 I co-organised an event at the Marx Memorial Library on intergenerational feminisms and the media. The speakers' ages ranged from 16 to 70 as we were keen to hear what feminism meant to women and girls across generations. The event was not targeted solely at an academic audience. There were also activists, mothers and daughters, teachers and school pupils, in attendance. A number of crucial issues came to light, particularly in terms of intersectional oppression and the need for an anti-capitalist and intergenerational feminism.

The two 16-year old speakers stated that the most powerful forms of oppression that they faced were issues of body image, sexual harassment (in school, online and in the streets, particularly from older men), and media representations of women. It is imperative, however, to recognise that these experiences of misogyny are (as has been argued by previous generations of feminists) generated by a corporate culture that needs to feed its beauty and health complexes and hence seeks to capitalise on long-held fears around the female body. In addition, economic inequalities deepen sexism: sexist behaviours are symptomatic of the unequal distribution of power - just as inequality increases so do attacks on the vulnerable, whether this is immigrants, people of colour, or women.

Another issue that was raised by audience members on more than one occasion was the perceived divisiveness created by an intersectional analysis. The questioners thought that emphasising difference was a means to circumscribe solidarity. What this perception fails to take into account is that a feminism that really wants to take on inequality cannot be based on a simple idea of similarity or sisterhood. It needs to be able to acknowledge differences and seek an understanding of how, under neoliberal hegemony, different groups are oppressed in different ways because of the complex intersection of social, cultural and economic powers. Feminism has always been a productive and generative site precisely because its desire to hold a political conversation about half the world's population has forced it to take these issues into account. Its intersectional analysis is its strength and its longevity.

Feminism has a tradition of fostering spaces and languages of self-reflexive debate, and we can draw on this to create an ethics of conflict that doesn't replicate the old macho styles of adversarial politics, and that counters the media representation of the trivialised catfight. There have been some hard-won insights here in the feminist movement, including the acknowledgement that political transformations are only possible when power and privilege are personally and politically acknowledged. Many feminists of colour have done much emotional, experiential and philosophical work about ways of inter-relating within feminist contexts. For example, Bernice Johnson Reagon's has written strikingly on coalitions; and Andrea Lee Smith, bell hooks and Audre Lorde have continually insisted on foregrounding race in feminist discussions, and exposed how 'white guilt' can hinder political debate.

Feminism has always been a space where analysis is deep and sustained, and where disagreement has enriched understanding of how the intersections of power oppress people. And it is critical to create a more robust infrastructure to help ensure that activists and thinkers do not suffer from fatigue, and that feminism does not become a politics for the privileged. Universities can still offer sites where these arguments can be nourished, though it is important for academics to be accessible and to maintain links with their communities. Feminist movements have cultivated a legitimate niche

within universities, not only in the centres of women's studies (which have been under attack for a while) but also in fostering feminist research and collaborations. Extensive archival work has re-covered women's histories and women's writing. This is evidence of a radical political movement that has the tools for the long-term.

Nevertheless, there is still a risk that feminism will be an archived and reified movement. The marketisation of universities, which enforces narrowly defined funding structures and areas of research, as well as inflicting a culture of competitiveness and overwork, means that they are less and less able to foster radical political spaces. However, universities working in partnerships with NGOs, activists and schools have the opportunity to institutionalise, fund, and re-energise intergenerational feminist politics. In turn, activists and collectives have the potential to re-radicalise universities. Universities are in crisis and desperately need the support of other organisations and groups in order to prevent their destruction. They have often been dismissed by some activists as remote ivory towers or qualification factories. However, it is precisely their ability to generate funding, affect policies, create long-lasting connections, and disseminate knowledge, that means that they can be involved in fostering feminism, generational dialogue and deepening intersectional critique.

ⁱ This is estimated by the Fawcett Society. Cited in Women's Resource Centre, *Factsheet: Women and the Cuts 2012*, p. 5. Available at info@wrc.org.uk.

ⁱⁱ Sandra Laville, 'Domestic violence refuge provision at crisis point, warn charities', *Guardian*, 3.8.14. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/03/domestic-violence-refuge-crisis-women-closure-safe-houses>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ben Little, 'A Growing Discontent: Class and Generation Under Neoliberalism', *Soundings*, Number 56, Spring 2014, pp. 27-40

^{iv} Neil Boorman, *It's All their Fault*, London, Harper Collins, 2010 and David Willetts, *The Pinch: How the baby boomers took their children's future - and why they should give it back*, London, Atlantic Books, 2010.

^v Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London, Sage, 2009.

^{vi} Susan Faludi, 'American Electra: Feminism's Ritual Matricide' *Harper's Magazine*, October 2010, p. 32, p. 30.

^{vii} The criticisms and petitions levelled against Lawrence & Wishart asserting copyright to their translation of the *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* are examples of such expectations

^{viii} Courtney E. Martin and Vanessa Valenti, '#Femfuture: Online Revolution' <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/publications/femfuture-online-revolution/>

^{ix} <http://vagendamagazine.com/2014/09/how-to-tell-if-youre-feminist-enough/#sthash.J5936LOj.dpuf>

^x <http://vagendamagazine.com/2013/02/i-am-sexy-i-am-funny-i-am-a-fucking-feminist/#sthash.he3wJdbW.dpuf>

^{xi} Olga Abasolo, Jeremy Gilbert, Hilary Wainwright, 'The Indignados and us', *Soundings*, Number 57, Summer 2014, p. 40.