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As if postfeminism had come true: the turn to agency in cultural studies of ‘sexualisation’

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Introduction

Our aim in this chapter is to examine what we see as a ‘turn to agency’ within feminism, in the context of the widespread take-up and popularisation of postfeminist ideas. Our particular area of focus lies in the field of media and cultural studies, and, more specifically, the growing interest in the ‘sexualisation’ of culture – a much contested notion that speaks to the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses. We will argue that whilst agency has always been important to feminist theorising, in some recent writing it seems to have become a veritable preoccupation, endlessly searched for, invoked and championed. In this chapter we will explore the striking parallels between what we argue is a neoliberal and postfeminist sensibility circulating in popular culture, and some contemporary feminist theorising in which agency, choice and empowerment are given prominence. Both the feminist writing about agency considered here, and the popular cultural postfeminist sensibility are marked by a celebration of the capacity of female subjects to make free and autonomous choices, and by a corresponding downplaying or even complete evacuation of any notion of influence, let alone coercion or oppression. Both focus upon areas of women’s lives in which trenchant feminist critiques have been articulated – and are now contested. Both rely on highly individualistic formulations of agency, which are thought in terms of personal acts rather than collective struggles. Moreover, both frequently position themselves as critical of feminism, and indict feminists not only for ignoring women’s agency but for imposing an orthodoxy of ideological constructs that are variously harmful to women or stand in the way of them acting in their own true interests.
We would like to say at the outset that we are not **against** agency – indeed, we find it hard to imagine what such a position might look like – and nor are we **afraid** of agency, as some feminist critics might have it.¹ On the contrary, we see agency as central to feminist theorising and argue that it has always – implicitly or explicitly - occupied a key place in feminism, not least because the very possibility of social transformation of gender relations depends upon it: in order to change the world we must **act**. However, we are intrigued by what we regard as a new ‘luminosity’² accorded to agency in some feminist writing. We seek to read this sociologically, interrogating its links with the dominance of the postfeminist sensibility that suffuses media and popular culture. It is important to note that our argument in this chapter does not engage **substantively** with specific claims about the ‘turn to agency’—though we have done so elsewhere—and nor do we focus upon epistemological or methodological considerations³. Instead, we seek to examine what it does performatively: asking where the agency fetish takes us analytically; and what, if any, kind of transformative politics it may lead to.

In advancing this argument, we build not from a single text or group of texts that could be readily identifiable as constituting a new and distinctive field or voice, but from a diverse variety of works that focus around representations and embodied sexual practices.⁴ More than this, our sense of a change in register comes from our

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reading of a ‘structure of feeling’ in feminist academia: from seminar announcements and conference question times, from angry tutting or non-verbal displays of affect, as much as from the printed (feminist) word. In this sense it is – we readily admit – contestable, so we advance it cautiously as one possible reading (of many) of what we both feel, nevertheless, is a significant shift.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, we consider the ‘turn to agency’ within a growing tradition of feminist cultural studies scholarship concerned with ‘sexualisation’. Next we turn to postfeminism and argue that contemporary media culture in the West is marked by a distinctively postfeminist sensibility, connected to neoliberalism. In the third part of the chapter we discuss what we see as some of the notable – and troublesome - continuities between feminist celebrations of agency and the postfeminist sensibility that dominates popular culture. Finally we conclude by asking what this distinctive focus on agency does for feminism, and for a politics of social justice.

The turn to agency media and cultural studies

Like most disciplinary areas, media, communications and cultural studies has long featured battles about agency. From the early ‘paradigm wars’ between ‘effects researchers’ who stressed the power of media measurably to change human behaviour, and the ‘uses and gratifications’ perspective who emphasised instead what people did with the media, it is fair to say that debates about structure versus agency, determinism versus voluntarism, have animated discussion for more than sixty years. Over the past two decades, however, we suggest that there has been a marked ‘turn to agency’, that has intensified further in the last few years, and become particularly visible within feminist scholarship.

The reasons for this are multiple and complex. They relate to the development of ‘audience studies’, and to the ‘turn to pleasure’ within media studies, which were themselves responses to dissatisfaction with the dominant traditions of

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psychologically-informed effects research, textual analysis and ideological critique. Critiques of media 'effects' have been well documented. At the heart is the notion of media audiences as ‘passive dupes’ who unquestioningly and uncritically absorb media messages 'hypodermically' injected into them. Often there seems to be the assumption that conclusions about the nature of media content (e.g. its ‘sexualised’ quality) can be taken as evidence of the effects of that content upon audiences – ie that a direct link can be assumed.

Whilst emerging from very different intellectual traditions from effects research, textual analysis and ideological critique were also seen as problematic for the way they seemed to suggest that audiences or users had no autonomy and would respond in pre-determined ways to media texts, as if people’s engagements could simply be ‘read off’ from a textual analysis of a romance novel, soap opera or game show. Within feminist scholarship, this criticism was underscored by a dissatisfaction with feminist accounts of women's relationship to popular culture and its scripts or ideologies of femininity. It was argued that these accounts did not capture the complexity of women's experiences, subjectivities or investments in particular cultural forms or modes of femininity, and tended to treat women not only as ‘cultural dupes’ but as victims of ‘false consciousness’, unable to see the real patriarchal forces at work in media texts such as women’s magazines.

The important work of feminist scholars such as Ang and Hermes marks part of a shift in media scholarship in which new topics and questions were given priority: a

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shift from textual analysis to studying audiences; a shift from ideological critique to a concern with pleasure; a focus on active, creative uses of and engagements with media rather than its power to construct social reality. This involved a shift in the identity of the feminist scholar, replacing critique with what Hermes dubbed ‘respect’. The attitude of ‘older feminists’ was, in a generational move not unfamiliar within feminism, repudiated as ‘disrespectful’, highlighting the disidentification between the feminist critic and her subjects. A particular articulation of ‘respect’ characterises much of the subsequent writing that we see as representing a ‘turn to agency’, particularly in studies of women’s participation in ‘sexualised’ culture.

*The sexualisation of culture?*

The notion of ‘sexualization’ is a problematic and contested one, yet it has become an extraordinary preoccupation in recent years. The phrase is used to capture the growing sense of Western societies as saturated by sexual representations and discourses, and in which pornography has become increasingly influential and porous, permeating ‘mainstream’ contemporary culture. Porn stars have emerged as bestselling authors and celebrities; a ‘porno chic’ aesthetic can be seen in music videos and advertising; and practices once associated with the sex industry - e.g. lapdancing and pole dancing - have become newly ‘respectabilised’, promoted as regular corporate entertainment or recreational activity. This shift speaks to something more than the idea that ‘sex has become the big story’ but, as Feona Attwood has noted, denotes a range of different things: 'a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent

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11 see Gill, 2007 op cit for discussion of ‘respect’


breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; [and the] fondness the scandals, controversies and panics around sex'.

Brian McNair\textsuperscript{14} argues Western society has become a 'striptease culture': preoccupied with confession, revelation and exposure. This is connected to an ongoing breakdown or renegotiation of the boundary between public and private, which is itself the outcome of multiple, intersecting factors including the (partial)success of the women's and sexual liberation movements, shifts in media regulation away from censorship and towards 'an informed consumer model' (Bragg & Buckingham, 2009), and the possibilities opened up by rapid technological change. More broadly, sociologists would situate claims about 'sexualisation' within the wider canvas of developments in advanced capitalism in which relationships are taking on more fluid and 'liquid' forms, intimacy is transforming, and sex is playing a more central role in 'projects of the self'\textsuperscript{15} though these arguments about transformation are themselves much debated by feminists.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{Sexualisation and agency: don’t worry, be happy}

Perhaps it is partly because the alleged ‘sexualisation of culture’ has become the focus of such anxieties and concerns\textsuperscript{17} that it has also become a discursive space in which ‘agency’ takes a prominent argumentative place – not least (understandably) to challenge the focus upon ‘harm’. Work in this tradition starts from a position that is agnostic about the putative intensification of


sexualisation, but sees the media as offering 'tools to think with'. This work presents audiences as active, knowledgeable, sophisticated and critical users or consumers of media, not passive dupes or victims. In a series of research projects on young people, sex, media and the 'commercial world', David Buckingham and Sara Bragg champion the view that children are not the 'naive or incompetent consumers' but 'use a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content'. Moreover, children's responses to sexual imagery display 'a well-developed understanding of how such images are constructed and manipulated' and children and young people are 'literate' and 'highly critical' consumers. Children and young people are seen as making active choices about how far to engage with sexualised culture -- for example, Buckingham and Bragg cite one girl who argues that she understood what she would expect to see if she was illicitly watching (UK's Channel 4) programmes late at night, and so would not be upset by them. Another child -- a 10-year-old boy -- reflects upon a Helena Christensen advert for beer headlined 'probably the sexiest advert in the world'. He writes in his scrapbook: 'I think I should know about it, but not right now because I think I’m too young to understand'. For the researchers, this was an indication that people -- including children -- are successfully 'managing their practices of freedom'.

Other work, more focused on pleasure, likewise seeks to refute the idea of 'sexualisation' as a 'monologic tool of ideological discourse', and to highlight the 'pleasures and practices' of women's active participation in 'sexualised' culture – from reading or making pornography to learning to pole dance. Girls' and women’s capacity to make autonomous choices is emphasised, and, when power relations or dominant cultural representations are -- rarely - mentioned, it

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20 Bragg & Buckingham (2009) op cit p.135


offers optimistic accounts of the ability of female actors to 'read reparatively'\textsuperscript{23} or to resist or to resignify dominant meanings – for example the ability of members of a pole dancing class to 'rework' traditional indicators of femininity into 'experiences of sexual agency and power'\textsuperscript{24}. Above all, what emerges from the new interest in 'agency' in this field is a sense of history and culture having little force or effectivity, of social relations (even in relation to the heavily freighted terrain of sex), dancing free of power or coercion. As the Third Wave collection Manifesta\textsuperscript{25} puts it

‘We, and others, call this intersection of culture and feminism “Girlie”. Girlie says we’re not broken, and our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation – Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels – and says using them isn’t shorthand for “we’ve been duped”. Using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues.

As we will argue, in the world conjured by some feminist writing on agency, it is as if 'postfeminism' has ‘come true’ - the ‘loaded issues’ have disappeared - and there really is no remaining oppression, domination, injustice or inequality that has any kind of systematic or patterned nature.

\textit{Postfeminist culture}

In the last two decades the concept of postfeminism has emerged as one of the most important notions for making sense of the wide variety of changes that have taken


place in the wake of the vibrant activity and activism of feminist movements in the West since the 1970s. As we have argued elsewhere\textsuperscript{26} the term has been used in four contrasting ways: to designate an epistemological shift within feminism, an historical break with (second wave) feminism, a backlash against feminism and a cultural sensibility. Here we focus on the latter two perspectives.

One of the key ways in which the notion of postfeminism has been used is to capture the sense of a ‘backlash’ against feminism\textsuperscript{27}. Backlash discourses may take many contradictory forms. They often work by attributing all women's unhappiness to feminism, but may also suggest that 'all the battles have been won' or, conversely, that 'you can't have it all -- something has to give'. Susan Faludi\textsuperscript{28} compellingly documented a backlash against feminism in the North American media in which flimsy ‘trend stories’ about (say) the impact of feminism upon women’s fertility reverberated through the ‘media echo chamber’ until they took on the status of unassailable facts or ‘things we know’.

A number of ideas that became key to the postfeminist backlash against feminism were articulated in a series of polemical books from the 1990s, which became celebrity ‘feminist’ texts even while promoting antipathy to feminism. They include Katie Roiphe’s polemic \textit{The Morning After}, Camille Paglia’s \textit{Sexual Personae}, and Christina Hoff Summers’ \textit{Who Stole Feminism}?\textsuperscript{29} For these writers there was a fatigue with what were understood as totalising feminist accounts in which women were always depicted as ‘victims’. Katie Roiphe’s book put forward the idea that feminists were responsible for promoting a simplistic understanding of rape, that downplayed women’s own responsibility, and created a culture in which young

\textsuperscript{26} Word length forbids extensive citations here. A variety of contrasting positions are discussed in this article: Gill, R (2007) Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. \textit{European Journal of Cultural Studies} 10: 147-166.


\textsuperscript{28} Faludi, S. (1992) \textit{Backlash: the undeclared war against women} (London: Chatto & Windus).

female students could (and did) have consensual sex and then ‘cry rape’ the morning after. Roiphe coined the phrase ‘victim feminism’ to capture her argument that feminist accounts of rape were stripping women of agency and responsibility in sexual relations. Her work resonated with a contemporaneous trend, particularly in relation to violence and sexual abuse, to accentuate the possibilities of surviving traumatic experiences, and a lexical shift towards talking about ‘survivors’ rather than ‘victims’. Works like Roiphe’s received extensive media coverage and discussion and became, we argue, crossover texts that helped to establish a sense of feminism as an orthodoxy, rather than – as we see it - a social movement and body of work that has always been characterised by discussion and disagreement - and which further contended that feminists routinely denied ‘agency’.

Arguably, the ‘Third Wave’ movement, told as a generational story, also helped to contribute to this sense of feminism as an orthodoxy, accusing second wave feminists of holding rigid positions about feminine consumer culture – re-written in Third Wave language in more celebratory terms as ‘girlie’ culture. Interestingly its preeminent focus is on embodied practices such as wearing high heels, painting finger nails and participating enthusiastically in sexualised culture. ‘Painting one’s nails is a feminist act because it expands the notions of what a feminist is allowed to do or how she may look’, Debbie Stoller explains. The ‘problem’, it seems, is not patriarchal capitalism, but second wave feminism, and a feminist act is any action that overturns the previous alleged censoriousness of feminism – notwithstanding the fact that this very image is itself in no small part product of a hostile construction produced by Third Wave feminists themselves, that is enthusiastically disseminated by the media. Such stories elide the complexities of feminism – not least the fact that the ‘second wave’ was characterised by a diversity of queer and sex positive voices, including those of Audre Lorde and Gayle Rubin.

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A postfeminist and neoliberal sensibility

Accounts of backlashes against feminism are important, highlighting as they do the way in which postfeminist ideas may be implicated in particular political projects. However, the focus on harking back that characterises such accounts may miss what is new about contemporary depictions of gender, as well as tending to underplay the extent to which the entire history of feminist struggle has been characterised by ‘strategies of resistance, negotiation and containment’ which a linear model of ‘achievements won and then subsequently lost’ cannot illuminate. Moreover, whilst notions of backlash and retrosexism have been crucial in highlighting the reactive (as well as reactionary) nature of many contemporary representations, the elision of postfeminism with anti-feminism misses a crucial feature of current media discourses: namely the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas within them.

Drawing on this notion of entanglement we argue that postfeminism is a sensibility characterising large parts of contemporary culture. In an influential essay, Angela McRobbie (2004) argued that what is distinctive about postfeminist culture is the way in which a selectively defined feminism is both ‘taken into account’ and repudiated. She argues that this double entanglement facilitates both a doing and an undoing of feminism: (young) women are offered particular kinds of freedom, empowerment and choice ‘in exchange for’ or ‘as a kind of substitute for’ feminist politics and transformation. One valuable feature of this perspective is the way in which it positions postfeminism as an object of critical analysis, rather than as a theoretical orientation, new moment of feminism or straightforward backlash. In this sense postfeminism becomes a term that can be used analytically - whose nature and content must be specified. Elsewhere, beginning that project, we have suggested that a postfeminist sensibility includes the notion that femininity is

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increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline; the dominance of a 'makeover paradigm'; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked ‘re-sexualisation’ of women’s bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to race and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender, yet, as we argue below, structural accounts of power relations – particularly gender -- are systematically excised from postfeminist culture.

Postfeminist values are closely aligned with the requirements of neoliberal societies for citizens to understand and conduct themselves as autonomous, self-responsible agents. In glossing (over) and reframing the existence of continuing gender inequalities, and in rejecting the possibility that gender-based injustice might remain a live force shaping the experiences of contemporary Western women, postfeminist culture embraces the neoliberal tenet that an individual’s circumstances in life are a result and reflection of the choices made by that person, for which they alone are responsible and accountable.

Perhaps more than any other features, what seems to define the postfeminist sensibility circulating in media and popular culture are its emphases upon ‘choice’, ‘agency’ and ‘empowerment’ as the watchwords of contemporary feminine experience. Practices that might have attracted critique from feminists are repackaged and enthusiastically embraced as the autonomous choices of empowered postfeminist subjects: cosmetic surgery is about ‘confidence’, surgeons’ posters inform us; pole dancing makes you powerful, gym websites reveal[38]; whilst advertisers proclaim that waxing and depilation are acts of ‘pampering’ and self-

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indulgence that no self-respecting woman should deny herself (‘because you’re worth it’).  

There are a number of distinctive features of postfeminist constructions of agency, choice and empowerment that seem to have significant similarities to the new feminist ‘turn to agency’. In the remainder of this section we will briefly consider four, relating to the reinstatement of individualism and the evacuation of the social; the flattening of subjectivity; the place accorded to the feminine body, and the hostility towards (second wave) feminism.

The personal is not political

Faith in the security of women’s agency forms the cultural logic from which postfeminism proceeds. While a postfeminist sensibility allows that women may historically have been oppressed and excluded from full participation in social life, and that feminism may have even been necessary in order to challenge these injustices, in postfeminist culture feminism is seen as having done its legitimate work and is no longer necessary or appropriate – at least in the West. This relates to what Tasker and Negra describe as postfeminism being based around ‘a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the “pastness” of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned or celebrated’. In fact, continued feminist interventions can be painted as hindering women via the implication that women somehow lack sufficient agency to make and manage their own choices and by (offensively) suggesting that they do not properly understand their own ‘real’ interests.

This conviction in women’s agency also constitutes the cornerstone of the ‘turn’ under discussion here. Reacting against ‘older’ feminist criticism in which

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women were apparently presented as ‘passive victims’, ‘docile subjects’, ‘cultural dupes’ or people with ‘false consciousness’, the current research by contrast highlights women’s status as active agents making choices about whether to wear ‘porno chic’ \(^{42}\) or to participate in ‘sexualised’ culture\(^ {43} \). Women and girls are depicted as autonomous, freely choosing individuals. Postfeminist discourse asserts and celebrates the existence of choices and the rights of women to act in ways that give them pleasure or that express preferences.\(^ {44}\) Various asserted as the pleasures of being pretty, the simple preference for the feel of hairless vulva, or the inalienable right to wear lipstick, postfeminist culture re-encompasses many practices that were critically targeted by second wave feminists as oppressive and reifying of gender difference, and rehabilitates them as harmless ‘choices’ that women are free to make (or not)\(^ {45}\). In this view, the particular beauty/body management practices are emptied of any meaning or significance beyond the expression of an entirely personal preference, and any alignment of the ‘look’ achieved through these practices with those to which women have been encouraged to aspired and for which they experience significant privilege is disavowed as a (happy) coincidence.\(^ {46}\)

The personal is definitely not political.

Yet in this analysis women seem oddly socially and culturally dislocated, and, moreover to occupy a landscape that is unmarked by (gendered) power or inequality. This generates a number of important problems. First, it points to the fetishisation of individual autonomy—itself much criticised by feminists, disability activists and postcolonial theorists, who have tried to fashion less individualistic, more relational accounts of personhood, not located in a model of the self as an independent island. Second, it raises questions about the ‘evacuation’ of the social. It appears that in the desire to reject accounts that might—however tenuously—imply any ‘false...

\(^{42}\) Duits, L. & Van Zoonen, L. (2007) op cit


\(^{45}\) McRobbie, A. (2004) op cit

\(^{46}\) Amy-Chinn, D. (2006) ‘This is just for me(n): how the regulation of postfeminist lingerie advertising perpetuates woman as object’, Journal of Consumer Culture, 6(2), 155-175. Fahs, B
consciousness’ among women, some writers have rejected the idea of influence altogether, producing a curiously a-social and a-cultural image of the female subject, whose actions are wholly explained in terms of idiosyncratic, personal voluntarism – even when following fashion or producing oneself as a normatively required feminine subject. Why, we wonder, is accepting that one is ‘influenced’ regarded as so shameful, so in need of repudiation? It is, after all, merely affirmation that we are social beings, shaped by culture, not isolated individuals living in a vacuum. As Christina Scharff has asked⁴⁷, could this seeming resistance to accepting cultural embeddedness reflect feminist academics’ own investments in neoliberal subjecthood?

Still a further issue is what this emphasis upon freely choosing individuals does to any understanding of power. If cultural influence is disavowed then coercion would seem to be rejected entirely. In the ‘turn to agency’ there is frequently little sense of constraints that characterise women’s lives. Thus, talking about the labour market, Catherine Hakim⁴⁸ argues that the slow pace of change in relation to women occupying senior positions ‘is the result of personal choices and preferences’ rather than discrimination. In this way, such writing obscures the profound relations of inequality and injustice that characterise contemporary capitalism.

*Uncomplicated subjectivities*

Just as neoliberalism requires individuals to narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices so too does the turn to agency depict women as unconstrained and freely choosing, rationally calculating subjects, selecting their path through life. In this sense, the analysis seems trapped within the very neoliberal paradigm that requires our critique, highlighting few of its erasures or costs. Moreover, analytically, it sidesteps – rather than addresses - all the difficult and

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⁴⁷ Personal communication
complex questions about the relationship between culture and subjectivity – eg how our wishes and desires are formed and sustained. It seems to return us to the older model of the self that has been so roundly critiqued in the last three decades of social theory influenced by poststructuralism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis. Covertly, it reinstates precisely the rational, unified subject that this work–much of it in women's studies–sought to interrogate. It seems to us that it offers an overly rational and overly unified view of the self, with little space for fantasy, desire or unconscious investments, or for splits or contradictions – aspects that previous feminist work has regarded as central to subjectivity. An example of this – though not explicitly feminist – is David Buckingham and Sara Bragg’s study of young people, sex and the media. They present young people as 'autonomous, calculating and self-regulating entities in control of their own quest for knowledge in relation to sex and sexual material' and able to make their own decisions and judgements and choices. These apparently extend even to the 'choice' of whether to be a child: 'the media are creating new ways of being a child -- not corrupting but confronting young people with choices about whether to remain a child or whether and when to enter the “adult” world of sexual media'. Here, then, 'child' becomes simply another discursive identity category, which subjects can choose or choose not to inhabit -- as if even that choice were fully within their control.

In the desire – which we support - to ‘respect’ young people, a particular version of subjectivity seems to be constructed: clear, coherent and readily-articulable as a biographical narrative in an research interview. Where is the sense of struggle, ambivalence, of incomplete or fragmented consciousness? Why must ‘respect’ be premised on such an idealised (and unrecognisable) portrait of subjectivity?

The focus on the pleasures of ‘sexualised’ culture, too, risks falling into what some have called 'pointless populism'. The finding that aspects of beauty practices, fashion or sexualised culture may be experienced by women as

49 Bragg & Buckingham (2009) op cit p.136
pleasurable becomes the endpoint rather than the starting point for analysis, leading to a kind of suspension of criticality in which the only thing it seems possible to say about a cultural phenomenon is that 'people like it' or 'I enjoy it'. Alternatively, when those pleasures are experienced by women there is often a problematic elision of pleasure, agency and empowerment such that merely getting enjoyment from something is held up as intrinsically transgressive and empowering for women and therefore to be championed. Yet as Judith Williamson argued more than two decades ago, there is no necessary connection between pleasure and transgression, and many cultural activities 'while certainly enjoyable, are not radical'. In relation to sexualisation, it is notable how some feminist scholars seem to echo marketers who use a postfeminist language of 'liberation' and 'empowerment' to promote everything from vibrators to burlesque shows – yet, interestingly, similar products or experiences are never sold to men in such terms. Active participation in 'sexualised' culture is, it seems, read as an expression of agency and power for women, while it may conversely still be associated with 'dirty raincoats' for heterosexual men. It is also worth pointing out how such moves frequently indict 'censorious feminists' for 'spoil…other women's fun'.

(Re-)enter the body: sex differences and the re-embrace of femininity

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The postfeminist sensibility that emerges from the throwing off of notions of oppression focuses particularly on the body. As part of its ‘taking feminism into account’ postfeminist culture presents the view that women’s equal worth and equal rights have been established beyond doubt, and thus creates a sense of freedom to ‘acknowledge’ what feminists have presumably known but felt compelled to deny all along: that women and men are fundamentally different. The easy acceptance of the ‘reality’ of sexual difference turns the second wave critiques of practices of feminine body work on their head; rather than reifying socially constructed gender differences, the celebration and amplification of differences between male and female bodies becomes a way to reinforce the rights to equal personhood for women as women. Rather than being coerced into femininity by the internalised oppression of patriarchy, postfeminism creates an understanding of women as having been coerced out of femininity by feminists’ over zealous and fundamentally misguided insistence on erasing sexual difference. What a relief: postfeminism has made the West safe for lipstick and nail varnish again; a heteronormative ‘Mars n Venus’ industry flourishes advising that the best recipe for human happiness is to accept and celebrate the differences between men and women; and Third Wavers reignite a long debate about the relationship between feminism and femininity by championing ‘girlie-ness’ as the most subversive act of all.

Understandings of women and men as similar and of gender as a reified social construction are presented as naïve or unsophisticated, and are replaced by a view of sex differences as real and powerful. Women are exhorted to recognise their strengths – and pleasures - as being located in these differences, and to use their

58 Baumgardner& Richards op cit; Karp et al op cit.
beauty and sexuality to maximise their power and success. Catherine Hakim’s deeply problematic nomination of ‘erotic capital’ as a means to power, situating it alongside economic, social and cultural capital, provides a vivid illustration of the crossover between circulating postfeminist ideas, and academic scholarship that attempts to reclaim women’s agency and empowerment. Steeped in homophobia (and classism and racism), it revels in the (assumed) power over men bestowed by the capacity of the ‘sexy’ feminine body to incite desire. The sexy, powerful feminine body is presented as capable of rendering men helpless and replaceable, dramatically shifting the axis of power in sexual politics. According to this view, in seeking equality with men in the same domains (the workplace, politics), feminism has misunderstood the real nature of feminine power (sexual attractiveness), and has delegitimised women’s ability to access and benefit from that power. As Kate Taylor has put it, young women ‘can work, they can vote, they can bonk on the first date...If a thong makes you feels fabulous, wear it. For one thing, men in the office waste whole afternoons staring at your bottom, placing bets on whether you’re wearing underwear. Let them. Use that time to take over the company.’

The attack on feminism

Postfeminist culture, then, is notable for championing traditionally ‘feminine’ practices and for doing so in an atmosphere of ‘defiance’, as if it were actually feminism, rather than deeply rooted gender injustices, that was preventing women from ‘having it all’, from fully developing their potential or living less constrained lives. It is perhaps surprising that a similar attitude seems to characterise some of the new feminist writing about agency. Like postfeminism, its sphere of interest is markedly shaped by feminist concerns. This work orbits around long established areas of feminist interest and discussion: reproductive health, beauty work, ‘sexualised’ culture. It is notable that only certain fields have attracted such a focus


on agency: sex work, but not supermarket work; egg donation, but not kidney donation; youth studies, but not old age studies. This new feminist ‘turn’ to agency dances close to longstanding bodies of feminist research, seeking to challenge what it regards as feminist ‘orthodoxy’. It’s tonal quality is distinctive: that of ‘bad girls’ speaking out against ‘big sister’, laying down taunts or challenges, depicting itself as a marginalised position even in areas – eg debates about trafficking or the ‘sexualisation of culture’ -- where it seems to be virtually hegemonic- within academia at least (though not, perhaps, in policy communities).

Too often the emphasis on women’s agency seems designed to repudiate a feminism always-already constructed as an orthodoxy. Laura Agustin, for example repeatedly indicts what she calls ‘feminist fundamentalists’ who insist upon talking about enslavement and the trafficking of women, and thus, in Agustin’s view, disavowing the very real agency and ingenuity of the women involved. There may well be real strengths in Agustin’s critique, yet we cannot help being struck by the sheer energy and force that is poured into attacking the ‘feminist rescue industry’. Of all the potential targets of critique for those writing about migration – and there are many: the huge apparatus of prisons and detention centres, the vast bureaucracy of immigration and citizenship controls, the increasing injustices of global capitalism, etc etc – feminists trying to support trafficked women seem a curious focus of such intense activity. Moreover, we are interested in why the argument is constructed so strongly as an attack on feminism (as in postfeminist media culture more broadly), rather than – more productively, we suggest – an argument within feminism, fought on a terrain in which much is held in common, but in which we aim to speak across our differences, not to create some imagined unity but to move forward with a transversal politics. From this perspective of dialogue and engagement, a repudiation of an imagined orthodoxy or fundamentalism is decidedly not necessary, and could be seen as a hostile attack on feminism that is


very much in tune with the postfeminist times. The argument here is designed to call attention to the politics of feminist storytelling and in particular the way in which a depiction of a feminist orthodoxy does political work that resonates with and supports the sensibility of postfeminist culture.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have explored some of the features of what we tentatively identified as a ‘turn to agency’ in contemporary feminist writing, focusing particularly, but not exclusively, on cultural studies of ‘sexualisation’. We would nevertheless identify much that is of value here: first, the foregrounding of girls and women as actively shaping their own lives – albeit in conditions not of their own making – the second part of Marx’s famous dictum sometimes underplayed (in our view); secondly, the way in which this work raises questions about the ethical relation between (feminist) researcher and researched; thirdly, its focus in giving a political status to girls and women’s actions, moving away from a univocal discourse of concern and harm; and finally its significance in drawing attention to the productive and constitutive role of feminist research and writing – correcting the notion of a somehow ‘innocent’ feminism outside of ‘power-knowledge’ relations. All these contributions are significant.

However, within the limits of space, we have also sought to draw attention to what we see as disturbing parallels between some feminist championing of ‘agency’ and the wider, dominant postfeminist culture. We have highlighted the retreat from the social and from an understanding of power relations. The turn to agency is built upon a rejection of the idea of ‘passive victims’, but seems in the process, to have rejected any idea of victimisation, coercion or domination altogether. Some advocates of ‘agency’ argue that ‘victims cannot engage in the realm of the political’, yet we are not clear why not? What makes acknowledging victimisation or oppression the grounds of not being able to speak as a political

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subject? Doesn’t most political mobilisation emerge precisely from felt experiences and understandings of oppression or discrimination? Why are victims assumed to be passive? How did these two words become so yoked together? (like ‘harmless’ and ‘fun’) Aren't agents sometimes victims too? To raise this is decidedly not to invoke a stable always-and-forever identity of victimhood—or to impute some fixed psychological characteristics to victims—but simply to acknowledge that we live in a world characterised by brutal and obscene injustices, in which power relations remain live forces shaping and constraining women's (and many men’s) lives.

We also highlighted the way in which the turn to agency is built upon a notion of the subject as autonomous, coherent and unified: like the ideal subject of neoliberalism, she is understood to be navigating a rational, self chosen pathway through life, unaffected by contradictions or ambivalences, and conveniently able to excavate, and apparently straightforwardly ‘lay bare’, all the influences upon her. Such a depiction of subjectivity is not, we suggest, equal to the task of understanding the complicated terrain of desire, intimacy and sexuality. Instead we need psychosocial approaches that are capable of thinking the difficult and entangled relationships between culture and subjectivity—not reducing women to dupes who respond like automatons to cultural texts, but nor rejecting the role played by those texts in disciplining and reconstructing selfhood (for all of us.)

Substituting individual voluntarism for cultural determinism has not, we suggest, proved satisfying or productive.

Our third point of critique centred on the revalorisation of femininity and natural sex differences, located within a deeply problematic heteronormative framing of gender complementarity. We note the way in which this re-animates an assumption of women and men as antagonists—in which sexual attractiveness or ‘feminine wiles’ could be used by women in a power struggle against men—even whilst its advocates distance themselves from what they presented as the ‘anti-male’ bias of earlier feminism! This, we argued, forms but one part of the way in
which the ‘turn to agency’ seems to be built upon a hostility to feminism constructed as monologic, censorious and fundamentalist – at a sweep erasing feminism’s diversity, and lending weight to popular postfeminist attacks upon it.

*Agency as a culturally-demanded script*

The turn to agency in feminist writing has occurred at a moment in which – at least in some contexts – agency is increasingly culturally demanded or even normatively required. In Western postfeminist societies ‘agency’, like ‘empowerment’, is heavily promoted. Postfeminist culture presents women as active, entrepreneurial subjects. As we have discussed extensively elsewhere, even the sexual representation of women has shifted from passive objectification to modes that emphasise women’s agency, power and pleasure. Key to the features of neoliberalism is the requirement that individual biographies be narrated as if they were the outcome of deliberative action and choice. This is not an abstract proposition: it holds true across multiple domains - from being the ‘right kind’ of help-seeking victim, to getting a job or research grant or obtaining access to cosmetic surgery. We must all be ‘agents’ now.

This plays out transnationally in uneven ways, to be sure, and Mohanty’s powerful critique of development constructions of ‘Third World Woman’ as passive, silent victim still holds some force – not least in the imperialist dynamic that has been endlessly replayed during the War on Terror (Puar and Rai, 2002; Haritaworn et al, 2008).

**References**


However, a focus upon agency does not necessarily challenge an imperial gaze. As Christina Scharff has noted, a common trope of contemporary Western discussions of feminism is precisely the displacement of a need for it onto the global South – or, indeed, onto particular figures in the West/North eg ‘the oppressed muslim woman’.[70] Moreover, within the sphere of development ‘neoliberal agency’[71] is itself fast emerging as a disciplinary project. Development bodies now increasingly mobilise the notion of girls as agents rather than victims–something clearly seen in the various strategies that coalesce in ‘the Girl Effect’, which contends that ‘the revolution will be led by a 12-year-old girl’.[72]

In tune with this neoliberal ethic there is a ‘feminisation of responsibility’[73] in which it is women rather than men who are addressed as the ‘right kinds’ of subjects for aid/intervention: entrepreneurial, community-minded ‘responsibilised’ subjects. Furthermore, as Shani Orgad[74] notes, even humanitarian organisations are moving away from depictions of victims of suffering (torture, displacement, famine) as victims – with complicated implications.

Such shifts produce new dilemmas and complexity. At one point it may have seemed that ‘agency stories’ were more ‘respectful’ than ‘victim stories’, but the growing institutionalisation and commodification of ‘agency’ as a trope, may yet force reconsideration of that–and of the idea that any feminist stories are politically

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innocent. In the ‘turn’ we have been discussing it is as if agency were a pre-eminent value in its own right, and as if feminist scholarship inhered in the act of revealing those moments of agency. To claim something is agentic, however, is not, in the end, a solution; it does not avoid the need for feminist politics and judgment – however contingent and contextual this should surely be. But in the meantime, as we have tried to show, this turn is complicated by being deeply implicated in wider shifts, many of which connect to the dubious politics of postfeminism.

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