

Looking Back: 'Post-Feminism', History, Narrative



University of Warwick

20-21 September 2012

Convenor

Dr Katherine Angel (University of Warwick)

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IAS, Millburn House

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Organised by the Centre for the History of Medicine - University of Warwick

Venue

Institute of Advanced Studies, Millburn House, University of Warwick

Millburn House is located two buildings along from University House in the University of Warwick Science Park – it is marked as **building 42** on the main campus map (the building is in the top right hand corner of the map). This can be downloaded at: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/visiting/maps/campusmap/> Please note that the building numbers on printed versions of the map may be different. Once you arrive at Millburn, use the front entrance shown on the photo and take the staircase opposite you as you enter. IAS is on the left at the top of the stairs. If coming by road, a map can be downloaded from:

http://www.warwicksciencepark.co.uk/img/uwsp_mapweb.pdf

Accommodation

For those booked into accommodation, you will be staying at our conference centre: Arden House; located within the University site – it is marked as **building 1** on the main campus map (see above). For more information on visiting the University of Warwick please see our web:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/visiting> / <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/conferences/arden>

Parking

There are a limited number of visitor parking spaces available; should you require a parking space for access requirements, please do let us know and we will endeavour to take these into account.

Conference Dinners

The Conference Dinner on Thursday evening will be held at Arden in the Private Dining Room.

There will be a small wine reception on Friday evening in the Millburn House Foyer (Ground Floor).

Taxis

The University uses Trinity Taxis for travel arrangements.

Tel: 02476 631631

For those claiming expenses, we ask that you please keep your receipts.

Should you have any dietary or access requirements please contact the Centre for the History of Medicine Administrator (Tracy Horton) via email: T.Horton@warwick.ac.uk or tel: 024 765 72601.

Conference Information

The conference will explore the activity of looking back, historically and narratively, at second-wave feminism and its legacies. The term 'post-feminism' has gained currency in the US and UK to diagnose a culture in which feminism, understood as having achieved its aim of equality between the sexes, is seen as no longer relevant. Influential commentators such as Angela McRobbie (*The Aftermath of Feminism*, 2008, Sage) suggest that to historicise feminism is by definition an act of 'turning one's back' on it. Young women, the argument goes, are required to look back at feminism as something unnecessary, old, and worn – with the 'dismantling of feminist politics' inextricably linked to the contemporaneous 'dismantling of feminism within the academy.'

How are we to construe the gesture of looking back – as historians, literary scholars, critics, and writers - at different forms of feminism? Historical scholarship on the postwar period must include scrutiny of the feminisms that altered the medical, social and cultural landscape of the last sixty years. And yet if historians of this period include second-wave feminism as a category of historical analysis in itself – as an agent of historical change – then what relationship does this historical activity have to a 'post-feminist' stance that has been diagnosed as a symptom of a contemporary rejection of feminism? How should one look back, historically and critically, at the feminisms of the postwar period? What are their legacies for the methodology and politics of contemporary scholarship in this area?

Moreover, what are the narrative and artistic challenges of historicizing feminism? Where does the diagnosis of 'post-feminism' leave not just the writing of history, in particular, but writing in a larger sense? What are the narrative and creative forms that are adequate to the task of looking back, however that looking back is construed? And in an era when much dissatisfaction is voiced about second-wave feminisms, and when criticisms of feminism are glossed (perhaps too crudely) as 'post-feminist', how do we locate and understand our own scholarship amidst these often bitter debates?



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Provisional Programme

DAY 1: Thursday 20 September 2012

9.30	Registration and Refreshments
10. 15	Katherine Angel: Housekeeping, and introduction of themes: How Do We Look Back?
11.00	Adrian Bingham: Impossible to Shift? Feminism and the 'Page 3 Girl' Laura King: Fathers as Feminists: Fatherhood and (Post) Feminism in Britain
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12.30	Lunch (Millburn House Foyer)
1.45	Barbara Marshall: Post-Feminism, Post-Ageing, and Bodies-in-Time
3.00	Refreshments (IAS Reception)
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3.30	Jonathan Dean: Resistance and Hope in the 'Cultural Space of Post-Feminism' Laura Schwartz: 'Standing in the Shadow of Your Sister: Reflections on a new generation of feminism'
5.00	Close of Day One
6.30	Conference Dinner, Arden House (Private Dining Room)
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DAY 2: Friday 21 September 2012

10.00	Kathy Davis: Wetlands: Postfeminist Sexuality and the Illusion of Empowerment Allie Carr: How Do I Look?
11.30	Refreshments (IAS Reception)
11.45	Katherine Angel: Summing up Round-table discussion
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12.45	Lunch (Millburn House Foyer)
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Abstracts

Dr Adrian Bingham (Sheffield University)

Impossible to shift?' Feminism and the 'Page 3 girl'

The first topless 'page 3 girl' appeared in the *Sun* in November 1970, in the very same week that feminists famously flour-bombed Bob Hope on live television as he hosted the Miss World contest in London. Feminists have battled against 'page 3' since its introduction, and the campaign continued this year with a submission from women's groups to the Leveson Inquiry. For some commentators, this is a tired campaign with familiar arguments against an entrenched target that appears 'impossible to shift'. Yet there have been important shifts across the period both in the 'page 3' feature itself and in the arguments surrounding it; analysing 'page 3' provides important insights into changing attitudes to sexuality, the body and, more broadly, feminism. This paper will use debates about the 'Page 3 girl' to explore the construction of feminism and 'post-feminism' and to consider how historians should situate and assess feminist campaigning.

Dr Laura King (Warwick)

Fathers as Feminists? Fatherhood and (Post) Feminism in Britain

This exploratory paper will examine the history of fatherhood, the use and abuse of the history of fatherhood, and the somewhat charged agenda around fathers' rights and responsibilities. Constructions of fatherhood today are by nature 'post-feminist' – beyond an obvious tautological definition of post-feminism here, fatherhood in the present is shaped by understandings of men's and women's roles as questioned and challenged by second-wave feminist thought. (Post)feminism is inherently relevant to debates around fatherhood, fathering and fathers' rights and responsibilities – the way domestic labour and childcare are divided between couples and/or parents continues to be a primary feminist issue. Common understandings of modern parenting suggest that it is a shared practice; this is shown, for instance, in the move towards shared maternity and paternity leave around the time of birth. This is a largely post-feminist understanding of the family, to take one definition of this term, with equal and shared duties. Yet research constantly emerges telling us that this division in the home is much less equal in practice, alongside the continued favouring of men in the workplace.

Alongside this, nostalgic visions of the family in the past are frequently invoked to suggest an ideal for the family today, and thus there is also a need to consider the history of the use of the history of women, men and the family. This paper will focus on the links between (post)feminism and changing fatherhood, and in doing so will raise questions about which school of feminism is most relevant today. Should feminist thought direct itself towards the promotion of women's causes, therefore arguing for the preservation of long-term maternity leave and the rights of women to choose whether to name the father of her child on her birth certificate, to give two current examples? Or should feminism be defined as the fight for equality between the sexes, and thus should feminists work towards shared parenting and completely equal rights and responsibilities in family life? Fatherhood, then, provides an interesting case study through which to examine feminism in the past and present.

Professor Barbara Marshall (Trent University, Canada)

Post-Feminism, Post-Ageing, and Bodies-in-Time

The recent proliferation of images of older people as active, sexy and productive often sits uneasily beside alarmist demographic pronouncement of a 'tsunami of geezers' that threatens to suck the life out of Western economies with their health and welfare needs. Work in cultural gerontology has identified the agency-filled 'third age' as a cultural landscape which has reconfigured ageing lifestyles and identities in late modernity, setting it in sharp opposition to the 'fourth age' of decline and dependency. Continued performance of gender and sexuality has become an important part of the boundary-work between these life stages. I use the term 'post-ageism' to reference the set of assumptions – akin to post-feminism – that new forms of subjectivity and agency are now available to those previously excluded from them (women, older people) and that this has shifted the related political ground. In this presentation I'll probe some of the deeply contradictory aspects of this discourse, particularly as it imagines the temporalities of gendered embodiment.

Dr Jonathan Dean (Leeds University)

Resistance and Hope in the 'Cultural Space of Post-Feminism'

There is, I would argue, little doubt that the signifier "post-feminism" is invaluable for making sense of the current gender regime. However, this paper aims to problematise the temptation to equate what McRobbie calls 'the cultural space of post-feminism' with a generalised dismantling of possibilities for feminist politics and resistance. In so doing, I make three specific points. First, I want to suggest that post-feminist "undoings" of feminism may themselves act as a spur for a renewed commitment to feminism as a social movement. Second, I draw attention to some instances of "post-feminist" discourse that frame (second wave) feminism in a manner that is ambivalent and sometimes even partially affirmative, rather than repudiatory. Finally, I raise some critical questions about how affects of despair and narratives of loss figure in feminist discourse in a "post-feminist" context. Overall, whilst 'the cultural space of post-feminism' is of course problematic and in many ways deeply alarming, we should still be attentive to the ways in which it plays host to a multitude of sites of unevenness, resistance and critique, which potentially function as sources of hope.

Dr Laura Schwartz (Warwick)

'Standing in the Shadow of Your Sister: Reflections on a new generation of feminism'

This paper reflects on the intergenerational dynamics of being part of a 'younger' generation of feminists both inside and outside academia. The shadow of the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and 80s has loomed large over my work as both a feminist historian and activist. In 2008, an attempt to 're-think the history of feminism' through a conference organised around this theme brought many younger historians of the Women's Liberation Movement face to face with their historical subjects – resulting in confrontation as well as illumination. At the same time, work in a grassroots feminist collective which attempted to deploy some of the theoretical developments of the last 30 years to the everyday practice of feminism, also involved struggles of ownership over feminism's past. The paper asks how we might move beyond the cliché of the 'outdated women's libber' versus the 'apathetic post-feminist' to create cross generational alliances powerful enough to counter the reactionary gender politics of the austerity regime.

Professor Kathy Davis (Utrecht University)

Wetlands: Post-Feminist Sexuality and the Illusion of Empowerment

In my talk, I will explore the success and importance of Charlotte Roche's for understanding shifts in feminist discourse on women's bodies, sexuality, and sexual empowerment. An international bestseller, *Wetlands* is a graphic, confrontational, and, some would argue, pornographic narrative of a young woman's explorations of her body and sexuality. By mobilizing feminist discourses in specific ways, the book both reflects and has shaped the struggles of a specific group of young women with the legacy of seventies feminism – struggles which are played out in their search for sexual empowerment. I will use the controversies generated by *Wetlands* among feminist scholars to understand how the book, in particular, contributes to, but also undermines a critical, reflexive approach to women's sexual empowerment.

Ms Allie Carr (Sheffield Hallam)

How Do I Look?

Using an epistolary form in collaboration with Katherine Angel, my paper will negotiate Angel's book *Unmastered*, my own artwork and the use of the personal, subjective voice. I will show how self-consciousness, self-awareness and reflexivity can be voiced and shared in a way that allows for speculating, wishing and hoping new dynamic ways of being and doing feminism. I shall explore: how can something generated using a personal voice be used by others, how can it be put into wider contexts so that its potential can be realised, but also, how can it be tested out, so that through this voice, something robust can emerge?

Often what circulates within feminist discourse, are particular ideas, reduced down so that they can travel in and through conversations. But ideas are often contingently generated in reaction to wider conversations. What interests me, is not feminist *ideas*, as many I reject, but rather, feminist *methods*. In particular, I find 'sisterhood' appealing. In the introduction to the 1970s anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*, Robin Morgan wrote: 'Women's liberation is the first radical movement to base its politics—in fact, create its politics—out of concrete personal experiences. We've learned that those experiences are not our private hang-ups. They are shared by every woman, and are therefore political. The theory, then, comes out of human feeling, not out of textbook rhetoric.' I relate to the spirit and tenor of Morgan's visions for feminism, if the content now seems so specific to a particular context that the content of the book does not always present itself as a tool. The method however, 'the personal as political', does.