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MIND THE GAP

Attitudes and Emergent Feminist Politics since the Third Wave

Anita Harris

More than 10 years after the publication of key so-called third-wave¹ texts such as *Generation f, Listen Up!* and *To Be Real*, the idea of an even loosely organised movement of young feminists seems to have disintegrated. Those who attempt a comprehensive overview of feminist thought that includes recent times express bemusement at its current manifestations, mainly because there is no coherent agenda or singular movement (see, for example, Tong 2007). While the notion of a third wave seemed to hold hopes for a new surge in imaginative and diverse but linked-up feminist practice purportedly less driven by the perceived ideological alliances of previous waves, its little sisters, especially those young women now in their teens and 20s, have appeared less able to cash this out. For many commentators, this problem can be attributed to the neoliberal absorption of feminist ideology and the individualisation of concepts such as choice, power and independence (McRobbie 2007; Harris 2004) as well as the broader shift in social justice activism away from collective, hierarchical, state-oriented phenomena towards transitory engagements, heterogeneous movements and personal activities. This situation, sometimes characterised as 'post-feminism', leaves us with the image of feminism entirely mainstreamed and its political content removed or marginalised, the atomisation of feminist practice and the widespread disavowal of the feminist label.

While the apparent dwindling of feminist activism and transmogrification of feminist identity (ladette, anyone?) is a problem for all who are committed to social justice, in recent times there has been a particular focus on what this means for young women. It is widely accepted that social justice activism, not only feminism, no longer exists in the form it took during the heydays (imagined as the 1960s and 1970s), but it is young people who are routinely singled out as those least likely to engage in traditional political activities. At the same time, there is a considerable amount of feminist research about young women's (lack of) identification with the label 'feminist'. For the most part this has demonstrated that young women today distance themselves from big 'f' feminism, although they do espouse notions of equality and choice. These problems seem to interrelate: if young women do not identify as feminists, how can young feminist activism exist? In this article I want to undo this knot by reflecting on the research about young women's attitudes towards feminism and then looking at the growing evidence base for young women's emergent politics. My intention is to highlight the complexity in what young women say about feminism, and then consider how this shapes the (many forms of) contemporary feminist practice in which young women are engaged. Overall, I suggest that a focus on young women's attitudes has overshadowed a more productive investigation into contemporary young feminist practice, including its continuities with the past.

Young Women's Attitudes to Feminism

There have been three broad, common findings in the research with young women about feminism. These are: that young women are not inclined to call themselves feminists; that they believe that, to a large extent, the women's movement is a thing of the past; and that they privilege a narrative of individual choice. Recent studies that have drawn some or all of these conclusions include but are not limited to Sharpe (2001); Budgeon (2001); Rich (2005); Baker (2008), and RÚdólfssdóttir and Jolliffe (2008). This is, however, not all that young women say about feminism or the current standing of gender relations. Next, I look at just some of the research with young women to consider the complexity of their perspectives on feminism. My intention is not to conduct a comprehensive overview but to attend to studies and findings that complicate a singular story about young women and feminism.

First, while many young women are reluctant to call themselves feminists, some do and many others still endorse feminist principles. Zucker and Stewart have found that women today support what they describe as 'feminist goals' at rates similar to women in the 1970s, which suggests that feminism is no less or more appealing to the current generation of young women than it was at the peak of its second wave (2007, 137). In Bulbeck's large-scale Australian study, over half of the young women found feminism personally relevant and almost a half said feminists shared their values (Bulbeck and Harris 2008). Much research shows that young women demonstrate a commitment to equality, inclusion, anti-discrimination and women's rights, and are fundamentally guided by feminist ideals (see, for example, Sharpe 2001; Budgeon 2001; Rich 2005).

Second, young women tend to appreciate what feminism has accomplished thus far. In Bulbeck's recent large cross-national study, 85 per cent of the young Australian women said the women's movement had achieved good things, with figures even higher in the United States, Korea, Thailand, India and Indonesia (see Bulbeck 2008, appendix figure A4.3). Similarly, Aronson (2003) has found that young women have an appreciation of feminism and are aware of persisting problems. Yet in conditions where legal and political equality takes on the appearance of being enshrined, and formal battles are constructed as already won, many young women struggle to mark out territory for the women's movement today. This is further underscored by a pervasive culture of post-feminism which relegates such politics to the past and constructs feminist work as now complete (see Hall and Rodriguez 2003). Thus young women are grappling to name and act upon enduring feminist concerns, particularly those that coalesce around amorphous and apparently 'private sphere' issues such as heterosexual relationships, violence and childcare rather than the vote or the right to work. Further, dominant ideas about girls' potential and opportunity make it difficult to articulate continuing inequity (see Harris 2004; Jowett 2008). An added complication is the fragmentation of activism more broadly, such that there is no longer a singular, dedicated movement to join, so much as a range of behaviours, practices and campaigns to pursue.

Finally, narratives of individualism and choice may not be as dominant amongst young women as assumed and, where they are used, this is with some complexity. For example, although 'individualist feminism' is considered a prominent style of feminism amongst young women, with the problematic of choice at its heart, Bulbeck (2009a) has found in her cross-generational research that this is a minor discourse and slightly more likely to be employed by baby boomers than their daughters. She further suggests that

there are promising ways for renewed feminist activism to 'throw with the weight of choice' to both deconstruct this narrative and to link it to structure. Some research indicates how young women are indeed complicating the choice rhetoric and the centrality of individualism. For example, Budgeon (2001, 18) notes that the young women in her research 'exercised a politicized agency at the micro-level of everyday social relations', and suggests that this is how individualism can be a tool for micro-political action. Baker's (2008) study of the prevalence of the ideology of choice amongst young Australian women reveals that they are aware of the ways in which particular choices are differently valued for young women, even while remaining embedded in the narrative of choice as empowering.

In looking closely at the research about young women's attitudes towards feminism, a picture emerges of a commitment to feminist principles of equality and justice, and a grappling with the neoliberal context of choice and individualisation, but a sense that ideas such as structures (patriarchy), unequally positioned social groups (women, men) and organised responses to these circumstances (the women's movement) no longer have the purchase they once had. Within the post/anti-feminist culture of late modernity, this is hardly surprising. This does not mean, however, that young women have abandoned feminist practice. Instead, such practice has taken on several different forms that are shaped by, and respond to, these conditions. Many young women continue to pursue a feminist agenda through and around narratives of choice and individualisation, conditions of de-collectivisation and globalisation, a pervasive media culture and the emergence of new information and communication technologies. Against the popular assumption of a rather long post-feminist 'moment' in which young women appear to have failed to forge a viable feminist politics that implements a third-wave agenda, I next explore some emergent and positive possibilities for feminist futures.

Emergent Feminist Politics

First, it must be stated that many young women continue to engage in both conventional and re-shaped feminist social justice and social change activism that has strong continuities with earlier forms of agitation, even while some tactics or foci may be different. There has been a flourishing of texts from the United States that illustrate the range and diversity of young feminist activism there since the so-called generation wars of the early to mid-1990s (which took on specific political shape in this national context), including Hernandez and Rehman (2002), Dicker and Piepmeier (2003), Labaton and Martin (2004) and Baumgardner and Richards (2004). Aune (2009) looks at young feminist activism in the United Kingdom, and argues that there is 'a new wave of feminism' evidenced by conferences, regional campaign groups and protests. In the Australian context, Maddison (2004) documents feminist activism undertaken in the community, by young mothers, as well as by students on university campuses. Alvarez notes that young women in Latin America have created new and invigorated ways of doing feminist politics in the region that move beyond the traditional NGO model. She writes:

young women from all social groups and classes who proclaim themselves '*feministas jóvenes*' with agendas distinct from earlier generations—have produced effervescent movement currents that proffer trenchant critiques of enduring inequalities among

women, as well as between women and men of diverse racial and social groups, thereby expanding the scope and reach of feminist messages and revitalizing women's cultural and policy interventions across the region. (Alvarez 2009, 182)

Second, some young women's feminist activism has taken on marginal, cultural and de-collectivised forms consistent with a broader shift in protest politics away from hierarchical and formal organisations as well as state-oriented activism. What has emerged instead are decentralised and leaderless actions and campaigns, multiple, diverse, transitory and loose membership in movements and a focus on media and culture, personal action and public spectacle, and new information and communication technologies (see, for example, Melucci 1996; Klein 2001; Juris and Pleyers 2009). These tendencies have made some feminist activism less cohesive and movement focused and also more playful and culture oriented. Bhavnani and Foran note the preponderance of young women acting as leaders in the self-organising, non-hierarchical and heterogeneous networks of the global justice movement (2008, 323). Many other young women are involved in various feminist forms and activities of this movement (see Fry and Lousley 2001), including its spectacular public street parties and private hacktivism, as well as the more conventional protest style of the World March of Women. Still others pursue cultural politics such as the hosting of Ladyfests (see Schilt and Zobl 2008) and arts-oriented activism that seeks to address the diversity and complexity of women's identities and conditions today (see, for example, de Finney 2007 on the Canadian organisation *Antidote*, a multi-generational grassroots network for racialised minority and Indigenous girls and women).

Some other examples of young women's momentary, spectacular and humorous feminist public practices include culture jamming (altering an advertising slogan or image to undermine its message. See, for example, the *Jammin' Ladies* website) or radical cheerleading (groups gathering in public with pom poms calling out feminist 'cheers') such as the Dutch *grrrl* collective *Bunnies on Strike*. Young women who are involved in these kinds of activities often frame them as a feminist intervention in the overwhelming production of young women as consumers, and position themselves as cultural producers instead (see Stasko 2008). Many talk about the need for a new kind of feminist practice that takes into account the encroachment of the culture industry into every aspect of their lives, including politics (Harris 2004). Consequently, some young women are creating their own media and online counter-publics to express, enact and network around their feminist politics. Zines and blogs are just some of these forms (see, for example, Bobel 2006 on the reinvigoration of menstrual product activism by young feminist zinesters).

Sowards and Renegar suggest that this constitutes a new kind of feminist activism 'that operates in the private sphere or in less public arenas in comparison to the activist measures described in extant literature on social activism' (2006, 60). Importantly, however, all of these activities have strong continuities with earlier feminist political traditions, practices and performances, even while they are enacted under new social conditions. Individual and grassroots practices have come to the fore in times when public spaces for connection and action have diminished and young women are increasingly obliged to take personal responsibility for their own choices and life chances (see Harris 2004). Similarly, as Queniart and Jacques (2004) have noted in their research with young militant feminists, the mobilisation of identity and the utilisation of personal resources

have become central to new modes of engagement. Feminist subcultures, alternative media, culture jamming and online activism are some examples of this kind of 'underground' and more personal politics that is current and vibrant, but to some extent out of sight.

Third, young women's activism that is enacted under a banner broader than feminism is also flourishing. There is evidence of renewed activism on the part of young women in a range of politics that encompass but are not limited to feminist issues. The role of young women in the Zapatista cause is but one prominent example (see Baronnet 2008). Much research on activism amongst youth has found that young women are far more likely than young men to have social and political concerns and to take action on these (see Harris, Wyn, and Younes 2010; Roker 2008; Vromen 2006). They are also more involved in some new styles of activism, for example participation in political consumerism (see Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005). This is in spite of the barriers they face in overcoming stereotypes, marginalisation and even parental disapproval (see Gordon 2008; and Baronnet 2008 on the enduring subordination of women in Zapatista politics). Taft (2010) documents activism amongst young women across the United States, Canada, Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico which addresses issues such as workers' rights, child labour, land rights, privatisation of education, war and environmental degradation. Her research suggests that many young women have a joined-up perspective on social justice, and do not delineate their activism according to individual movements but are simultaneously engaged in multiple campaigns. This accords with their own multiple positionings and identifications. As Maddison points out:

there are huge numbers of women engaged in feminist struggles by any other name, whether it be better child care in their local community, or to push for equal pay to their male colleagues, or to get women and children out of detention centres. Those are feminist struggles. (Maddison quoted in Bulbeck 2009b, 21)

Fourth, a large number of young women espouse feminist principles, endorse the women's movement and believe in gender equality, but express and act on their views through everyday and personal means. This is a manifestation of what Sowards and Renegar call 'the idea of individual activism in everyday life and small contributions' (2006, 62). Budgeon's research illustrates how many young women understand that their choices are structured by gender, and draw on a feminist discourse to challenge inequities at the micro level of everyday life (2001, 20). In times that militate against collective identities and actions, these personal dispositions and individual actions are significant.

Finally, there are several activities in which 'ordinary' young women are engaged which deserve more attention as feminist politics. To date, there has been insufficient feminist attention to young women's high take up of web 2.0 technologies as an effort to craft public spaces and voices. As I have suggested elsewhere (Harris 2008), young women's efforts to 'broadcast themselves' across the spectrum of blogs, social networking and video sharing sites must be included in debate about the future of feminism because, while these media facilitate the neoliberal production of 'spectacular femininity' (McRobbie 2007, 734), they can also provide opportunities for young women to produce public selves in youth communities and to articulate their own concerns. Social networking sites are

places where young women can express both personal and political views and connect with diverse others. They can operate as 'safe spaces' from which young women speak out (see Mazzarella and Pecora 2007). As Preston (2008) argues, this carries enormous potential for feminist activism in terms of consciousness raising, organisation and campaigning, but is also significant in itself as evidence of peer-to-peer engagement and sometime politicisation.

Another emergent activity popular amongst young women that blurs the distinction between the social and the political is craft. Minahan and Cox (2007) note the rise of 'stitch'n'bitch' (groups of young women who get together to knit, stitch and chat, both physically, in cafés and pubs, as well as virtually and transnationally online) and suggest that this movement attempts to build community, sometimes to feminist ends. It is an environmental, anti-commodification movement made up of a loose affiliation of young women. As with social networking, stitch'n'bitch operates on several levels. Minahan and Cox argue that it is 'a new protest movement using craft as a subversive vehicle for comment on gender' (2007, 11). At the same time, it works to enhance social connectedness and well-being of women, and sometimes employs a practical politics (e.g. fundraising for campaigns).

Taken together, this body of evidence, whilst illustrative rather than exhaustive, does suggest that many young women are in fact active in feminist struggles in various locations worldwide. Under late modern conditions of choice, individualisation, a pervasive post-feminist media culture and broader forces of de-collectivisation, this is some achievement. I would suggest that it has been difficult to keep this picture of young feminist practice in focus because feminist scholarship has been overly concerned with what some young women say about being feminists, which is to some extent easier to document, rather than with what they do. Here I have suggested that it is important to pay close attention to the complexity in their attitudes towards feminism and the social conditions in which these are forged in order to identify the range of vibrant feminist practices in which they engage.

Many questions remain about the extent and viability of these diverse practices to make large-scale feminist change, as well as their status as proto-, fully-fledged or perhaps even post-feminist. It is also impossible to know the percentage of young women engaged in these activities. I have been inclusive and perhaps provocative in discussing both individual behaviours and leisure and cultural activities as part of a spectrum of contemporary feminist politics. For some, these will be outside the criteria for both feminism and politics. For example, Tong makes the not unreasonable claim that 'in order to have feminism, one has to believe that women constitute some sort of class or social group' (2007, 37). This is a principle potentially buried in discourses of individualism and even in the joining up of global justice campaigns wherein 'women' may be lost as a category. Aronson wonders whether passive supporters rather than agents of change can re-energise the women's movement (2003, 919). And Bell, amongst others, argues for a modest interpretation of cultural politics, writing that 'critiquing mainstream cultural images and creating alternatives cannot substitute for political activism that is directly aimed at changing social structures and inequalities on a broader level' (2002, 187).

In putting a range of activities next to one another, I have attempted to highlight the scope and variety of young feminist practices, some of which involve agitation across different sectors of power and an agenda of systemic change, and others which are

focused on community building, consciousness raising, self-empowerment, peer politicisation, cultural critique or just surviving in a (purportedly post-feminist) patriarchal world. In doing so, I am suggesting that acknowledgement of continuities with an equally wide range of past feminist practice and a disposition of inclusiveness are particularly important in times when patriarchal structures of power have become ever more diffuse and the status of (Western) women is only ever invoked as a settled question. In other words, what is required, I think, is an openness in our ideas about what constitutes feminist politics today, especially a greater understanding of the function of micro-political acts and unconventional activism in this historical moment as well as recognition of links with past practice. Such an approach might enable us to yet move beyond generationalism to forge 'a "new feminism" we do not yet know' (Bulbeck 2000, 21).

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1. Terms such as 'third wave' are, of course, contentious. I use this here to signal a particular way in which feminist theory, activities and agendas were both articulated by and attributed to some young women in the 1990s responding to calls to stake a claim as the next generation of feminists. I intend this to be read as one prominent generational categorisation of feminism rather than as an uncritical descriptor.

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