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# Political Not Generational: Getting Real About Contemporary UK Radical Feminism

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*ABSTRACT* In this article, I present data from qualitative research with 30 self-identified radical feminists who are currently active in the British feminist movement. I explore how participants defined their feminism, and threats to it – particularly challenges to organising women-only political space. I also focus on how participants related to the term third wave feminism, their definitions and critiques of this type of feminism as they perceived it. Many of the radical feminists in my research were keen to disassociate from the term ‘third wave’ and expressed an allegiance and connection to second-wave radical feminism, including those radical feminists too young to have any direct connection to that ‘wave’, being born too late to be politically active during the 1970s and 1980s.

**KEY WORDS:** Feminism, third wave, radical feminism, lesbian, young women

There is a growing field of commentary and analysis, from academics, journalists and campaigners, on contemporary feminist activism in the UK; activism which is also growing, allegedly pioneered by younger women (Banyard, 2010; Cochrane, 2010; Mendes, 2011; Measure, 2009; Redfern & Aune, 2010; Topping, 2012). This focus on the role of younger women has furthered familiar generational metaphors regarding the women’s liberation movement (WLM) (Dean, 2009; Henry, 2004; Woodward & Woodward, 2009). Underpinning a generational focus is the wave narrative, the idea that feminism as a movement, in the West at least, has progressed in a linear fashion from a recognisable first wave in the 1800s and 1900s, through to a second wave from the late 1960s to the 1980s and surfacing now as a third wave appearing since the 1990s, arising ‘out of a critique of the second wave’ (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 56).

Emerging in very different socioeconomic and cultural environments, each successive wave has been attached to successive generations and often viewed as their product and possession, considered to reflect the unique circumstances of that generation, as well as the feminism which went before. This generational attachment has led to contemporary feminist activism sometimes being described as ‘third wave’ and being bound particularly to younger women, although the term is perhaps used less in the UK than in the USA where it first emerged. In her book on the future of feminism, Walby (2011) asserts as follows: ‘Third-wave feminism is a label attached to the contemporary feminism of young women, which defines itself as different from previous forms’ (19). Scholar of third-wave

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feminism, Dean (2009, p. 334), posits that this generational understanding of the term third wave is relatively common to the British context:

I trace two different conceptions of the “third wave” – one referring to a poststructuralist and postcolonial critique of the second wave – and another referring to a specific generational cohort of young feminists. I argue that the latter conception has become dominant in the contemporary British context and to a lesser extent elsewhere.

In this article, using empirical data gathered from survey research and semi-structured interviews with feminist activists across the UK, I shall explore how activists themselves relate to the term third wave. It emerged that for many activists, the term freighted particular political ideologies, and was not used simply as a generational referent or chronological marker point in the progression of feminism as a social movement. One group of feminists in particular voiced strong opposition to the term and refused to be positioned as part of a third wave, or be classified as third wave feminists. This group included research participants who were aged in their twenties and thirties and thus who could be viewed technically as a ‘new generation’ of feminist activists or as activists in a period chronologically following the second wave. As the title alludes, all of these participants identified themselves politically as radical feminists – a type or school of feminism rooted in and perhaps most often popularly associated with the second-wave feminism of the 1970s.

I shall illustrate that for many contemporary radical feminist activists, the label third wave is distinctly ideological, does not refer simply to a new generation or younger cohort of feminists and is believed to contain several features which are antithetical to radical feminism – namely, the erasure of women-only space; and a pro-sex industry and pro-pornography stance. Radical feminist activists also often conflated what they saw as third-wave feminism, with postfeminism – sometimes epitomised by the so-called ‘power feminism’ of ‘media-friendly conservative feminists’ such as Roiphe and Wolf (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p. 166) – and also with a neo-liberal version of feminism often referred to as ‘choice feminism’ (Ferguson, 2010).

### **The Study**

The data presented here were gathered from qualitative, in-depth interviews and survey research as part of my Ph.D. fieldwork on the changing British WLM, conducted from 2011–2012. I interviewed 25 feminist activists around England of various backgrounds, drawn from an initial response rate of 74; the activists all responded to an online call for research participants which I distributed to UK feminist websites and groups. The selection was based on availability during the fieldwork period from approximately November 2011 to March 2012. To expand the sample, I also distributed an online survey, via feminist websites and email groups, which garnered 108 responses. I developed and piloted the electronic survey with a small group of feminist activists involved in the street protest Reclaim the Night, a traditionally women-only march against male violence against women, before finalising and distributing online. All of the survey respondents self-selected and the survey was not targeted at any particular group or individual. The field I researched is one in which I was an insider researcher (Kanuha, 2000; Naples,

2003), being an active feminist in the UK for nearly 20 years and identifying politically as a radical feminist.

The position of insider researcher is one often suspected of bias; as van Heugten (2004) recounts, suspicions are often raised when researchers interview colleagues or others close to them. ‘The selection of a topic that clearly reflects a personal interest and the selection of colleagues as subjects raise the spectre of “insider bias”’ (207). My experiences were no different; in order to address such concerns, I took care to advertise for participants widely and outside my own personal networks. In the final sample, only two participants were individuals I would call friends – who I socialised with outside activism – and the majority were unknown to me. Many participants were unaware of my background in UK feminist activism and several of those who were so aware used the research process to disagree with some of the events I have been involved in, or to raise critiques of my political standpoint, as they perceived it, on a variety of issues. Possessing a shared culture and lexicon with participants, what Naples (2003) calls a ‘greater linguistic competence’ above what outsider researchers may have at their disposal (p. 46), I took care to check the usage of shorthand, acronyms and insider references during the interviews, to avoid the pitfall of assumed meanings.

In summary, I feel my position brought only benefits, and I managed to avoid some of the common problems in insider research. As most of the participants were unknown to me, I did not experience discomfort that can arise when interviewing friends or colleagues for example. My field was not a workplace where my position as a researcher could prejudice my employment or my relations with colleagues. I did not feel that participants were unduly influenced by my own politics, or that they were affected by some sort of Hawthorne effect whereby they tailored their accounts to what they perceived I would prefer to hear; far from it in some cases.

For the purposes of this article, I selected, from over a hundred responses, data from those self-defined radical feminists ( $N = 30$ ) who were active in the WLM from the 1960s and/or in the present day. All names have been changed. The selected participants ranged in age from 20 to 65. Fourteen were aged 34 or under, the largest age group being those between 25 and 30 years old. An almost equal number identified as lesbian ( $N = 12$ ) and heterosexual ( $N = 11$ ), five identified as bisexual, one as queer and one identified their sexuality as ‘other’. All but one, who identified as Black British, defined their ethnicity as White, and all identified as female; they reported being active feminists from between 3 to over 30 years.

It is important to note that this was not a piece of quantitative research, the final sample selected is not statistically representative of older or younger radical feminists in the UK, nor is this something I would seek to claim. An obvious weakness in the sample group is the absence of Black Radical Feminists. This is particularly concerning given the historic and current tensions around racism, along with other intersecting structural inequalities, within the WLM itself. The fact of power inequalities between women has been debated within the WLM for decades, and is no less of a live issue in the contemporary movement, being aired in disagreements over the so-called ‘SlutWalk’ protests, emerging in the USA and the UK in 2011 for example (Brison, 2011), and in a popular thread, on Twitter in 2013, under the theme ‘Solidarity is for White Women’ (Kendall, 2013). Global forums provided by the Internet enable activists to share their experiences of racism and ethnocentrism within the WLM, highlighting the tenacity of structural inequalities within and between oppressed identity groupings, the persistence of what Verloo (2013) calls the

‘interfering inequalities’ which plague the very social movements attempting to challenge and end those inequalities (p. 893).<sup>1</sup>

### **What is Radical Feminism?**

Radical feminism is one strand of feminism, usually identified as beginning in the USA and being a product of the second wave of feminism (Coote & Campbell, 1987). Like feminism more broadly, there is no single definition of radical feminism; and there are probably as many definitions of feminism as there are people who identify as feminists. Self-identified radical feminists of the second wave, in the UK at least, were not always prolific in writing their own history or theory; at least not in published works (York et al., 1991). Arguably, this situation has resulted in the marginalisation of radical feminism, as histories and edited collections on the second wave, drawing on readily available and more mainstream sources, have frequently misrepresented or underestimated this strand of feminism, wilfully or otherwise. Historian of the UK second wave, Rees, points out that as many such sources were produced by socialist feminists, this branch of feminism has often been overrepresented, such that

the favouring of socialist feminism in memoirs and commentaries has produced a skewed historiography in which radical and revolutionary feminists are not represented in their own words, and where their ideas and practices are often dismissed. (Rees, 2010, p. 338)

Radical feminists in one collection affirm that the contribution of radical feminism has been maligned, and that this is partly because radical feminists themselves have not recorded it:

We feel that radical feminism has been a, if not the, major force in the WLM since the start, but as factions started to emerge it has rarely been women who called themselves radical feminists who have defined radical feminism. (York et al., 1991, p. 309)

Reviewing some of this literature (Bell & Klein, 1996), I suggest that radical feminism can be identified from other strands by four criteria, these being (1) a focus on patriarchy/male supremacy; (2) recognition of male violence against women as a keystone of women’s oppression; (3) extension of the term ‘violence against women’ to include pornography and prostitution and (4) the use and promotion of autonomous women-only political organising. Radical feminist theory has also contributed important political critiques of compulsory heterosexuality and of the nuclear family (Dixon, 1988; Rich, 1980). In the UK, radical and revolutionary feminists provoked debates on these latter issues in publications such as the infamous 1979 pamphlet *‘Love your enemy?’* on political lesbianism (OP OnlyWomen Press, 1981). However, radical feminism is perhaps most well known for addressing patriarchy and male violence, and has arguably contributed most political theory on these areas (Brownmiller, 1976; Firestone, 1970/1993; Hanmer, 1981; Hester, 1992; Millet, 1969/1972). This focus involved the problematising of men as a class, and correspondingly, the categorisation of women also, as a political class. As radical feminists Rowland and Klein (1991, p. 13) assert:

Radical feminism insists that women as a social class or a social group are oppressed by men as a social group as well as individually by men who continue to benefit from that oppression and do nothing to change it; the system through which men do this has been termed patriarchy [...] it is “power” rather than “difference” which determines the relationship between women and men.

The aforementioned strand of revolutionary feminism is a uniquely British school of feminism, founded in April 1977 by a then London-based feminist activist, Sheila Jeffreys. The school appears to share much in common with radical feminism, perhaps going further than the latter by identifying men as solely responsible for women’s oppression and therefore placing less attention on capitalism or other social forces for example (Hester, 1992). There were also other areas of disagreement between these two schools and sometimes there was conflict with revolutionary feminists suggesting that radical feminism had descended into a reductionist form of cultural, or lifestyle feminism (Jeffreys, 1977), what Campbell (1980) called ‘the cult of woman’, involving, for example, Goddess-orientated spirituality or environmentalism (Caine, 1997; Ryan, 1992).

It is this type of cultural feminism that is sometimes invoked, incorrectly, in broad criticisms of radical feminism in general, leading to the assertion that radical feminism is essentialist, that it posits a-priori, natural differences between women and men and simplistically aggrandises femaleness and femininity. Conjuring up the ‘separate spheres’ debates in the 1800s and 1900s (see: Mill, 1869/1984), which emphasised a natural, romantic and religious superiority of women (while not translating into any tangible form of privilege, economically or politically), Banks (1986), for example, in her historical study of the feminist movement in the USA and the UK, berates radical feminism for veering towards an ‘evangelical feminism, glorifying woman in her maternal role and looking to her in her specifically feminine attributes to reform the world’ (p. 243). Herein lies the association with essentialism or biological determinism, and several radical feminists have been charged with this crime and accused of cultural feminism, for example Daly, Rich and Dworkin (Alcoff, 1988; Echols, 1989). Lienert (1996) provides a thorough rebuttal of these charges, providing evidence illustrating that these so-called cultural feminists have explicitly denounced biological determinism. Dworkin (1993), for example, described biological determinism as ‘the most pernicious ideology on the face of the earth’ (p. 112). Morgan too in a 1996 memoir emphatically distances herself from biological determinism, arguing that radical feminism is not synonymous with cultural feminism but is in fact its very opposite (1996, p. 6).

Returning to early radical feminist texts however, attempting to untangle the received wisdom about their position from their actual body of work, it is clear that radical feminist theory was far from essentialist. Early works emphasised that gender is a social construct; therefore, that male violence is not a biological fact and that it can be reduced and even ended (Millet, 1969/1972). As one radical feminist humorously summarised in the *British Rev/Rad Newsletter* in 1981:

the fact that I don’t myself believe all men are absolute pigs makes me even more enraged and disgusted with the overwhelming majority who are, precisely because I know men could be so different. Women who regard all men as implacable enemies because they are biologically male are simply giving men an excuse for their male supremacist behaviour. (Mitchell, 1981, p. 1)

The charge of essentialism is just one of the many common stereotypes used to attack radical feminism, however. In 1980, Campbell accused radical feminists of anti-lesbianism by de-sexing lesbianism into a purely political standpoint; Byrne (1996) accuses radical feminism of essentialism and sexual segregation, and Gelb (1986) blames radical feminism solely for the association of feminism with 'man-hating'. Radical feminism often seems the vessel for popular imaginary of a feminism gone too far, an extreme, evangelical or fundamental version, what Califia (1997) referred to as 'feminist fundamentalism' (p. 86). These accusations, myths and stereotypes were familiar to all of the radical feminists who participated in my research, and I shall bring out some of their responses later in this article.

### **What is Third-Wave Feminism?**

Third-wave feminism appears to have emerged from the USA in the 1990s, although some sources suggest that the term was coined there much earlier in the mid-1980s in an unpublished collection on feminism and racism influenced by the identity politics of the 1980s that so characterised the Western WLM at that time (Orr, 1997). The term 'third wave' is usually attributed to Rebecca Walker, however, founder of the Third Wave Foundation in America in 1993 (Henry, 2004) and editor of a third wave collection in 1995. Walker's work to encourage political participation and leadership amongst younger women is perhaps why the term then came to be linked to young women.

Third-wave feminism has become associated with cultural forms of activism, often articulated in virtual spaces and often autobiographical, focussed on identity projects and experiences of personhood in contemporary society (Budgeon, 2011). Since the late 1990s, the Internet has provided a most conducive space for such personal expressions in the form of art, poetry, music, political commentary and autobiographical blogs for example (Budgeon, 2011). This defining autobiographical element has led to criticism, for example, that the third wave is individualistic rather than collective, that it has an unhealthy dependence on consumerism as a medium through which to define itself and that it focuses too much on the notion of choice (Baker, 2008; Ferguson, 2010; Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008).

Foundational proponents of third-wave feminism such as Baumgardner and Richards (2000) have encouraged the association of third wave with younger women, declaring that anyone born after the early 1960s inherited a world already transformed by feminism, the success of which obscured the struggles that went before, necessitating a new style of engagement with feminism. The fact of this newness and insistence on difference to the previous wave are common features of third-wave self-definitions (Gillis & Munford, 2004). Dismissing generational divisions, many writers have since argued that third-wave feminism, like feminism generally, is political, and therefore can be adopted by anyone, regardless of their age. Budgeon (2011) argues that third-wave feminism is not defined by the age of the claimant to that identity, but can be characterised by its focus on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and its disavowal of 'woman' as a universal category, having been influenced by queer theory and recent transgender and transsexual liberation movements. Scholar of third-wave feminism, Dean (2009) observes other features of third-wave feminism, noting that self-defined third-wave feminists are, generally, 'more likely to engage with issues related to popular culture, are less likely to be "anti-porn" and are (generally) more open to bringing men into a pro-feminist agenda' (339).

The radical feminists in my study raised several critiques of third-wave feminism, and the ideological positions they associated with it. Referring back to Dean's summary, presented earlier, which outlined the sometimes conflicting two popular conceptions of third wave (2009, p. 334), the radical feminists in my study adopted his first conception, viewing it as carrying ideologies, partly influenced by poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of the second wave. However, they were also aware that the term could be used purely practically (not ideologically) as a chronological referent.

I emphasise that it is not my aim here in this article to provide any singular definition of 'third wave', nor to give concrete examples of third wave feminist activism. There is a growing body of research which addresses third-wave feminism and which presents case-studies of self-defined third-wave feminist activism (see for example: Budgeon, 2011; Dean, 2010). My concern in this article is to present some of the voices of contemporary radical feminists and their views on the current condition of the UK WLM, including their own perception of third-wave politics and ideology. In so doing, I am not suggesting that the conceptions of third-wave feminism presented here are accurate or representative and am aware that debates over what constitutes third-wave feminism are likely to continue, both in activist and academic communities, and that these conceptions differ in the USA and the UK.

### **Radical Feminists Rap the Third Wave**

When discussing contemporary feminist activism in the UK, all the participants included reference to third-wave feminism and had several similar understandings of this term. They often connected third wave ideology with post-feminism and were opposed to what Charlotte termed:

glib, depoliticised, post-feminist claptrap. (Charlotte)

Charlotte was a 34-year-old local government officer living in Yorkshire; she had been involved in the WLM for around three years. Kira, the youngest self-identified radical feminist at 27 years old, was a full-time journalist and resident in the South West; she linked third-wave feminism with liberalism and neo-liberal narratives regarding the reification of choice:

I think the third wave in particular are perhaps related to a liberal, libertarian idea of feminism that's very pro-porn; and about, this is my choice, you know, if a woman does it it's a feminist choice, you know, even if it's just a choice to have a glass of white wine. So I don't identify as third wave myself. (Kira)

Helen, in her late fifties, gave a very similar account of this perceived brand of contemporary feminism, what Ferguson (2010) labels, 'choice feminism', which radical feminists in my study often conflated with third-wave feminism, viewing the two as synonymous:

I think there is a misunderstanding that whatever a woman "chooses" is feminist simply by virtue of the fact a woman "chose" it. (Helen)



Like Kira, other participants linked third wave politics to a pro-pornography, as well as pro-prostitution stance. There was a suggestion that third-wave feminism has perhaps not been so critical of what participants felt was an increasing normalisation of the sex industry since approximately the 1990s. Many argued, in fact, that some expressions of third-wave feminism embrace and defend such a trend with narratives of choice (furthering their conception of third-wave feminism as a version of choice feminism), framing it as empowering rather than as a symptom of patriarchy. Mary, a 44-year-old charity Director in London and an activist for over 20 years, articulated this suspicion:

Far be it for me to talk about such old fashioned ideas as false consciousness, but if you find that your voices are what the patriarchy would like you to say and do anyway, then surely that is up for debate. I'm not saying you shouldn't do it, I'm just saying, surely, it's up for challenge. (Mary)

All the radical feminist participants voiced opinions against pornography, prostitution and the wider sex industry and saw this as an important part of their radical feminist politics. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that radical feminist theory uniquely tackled these subjects, producing pioneering feminist analyses of pornography in particular from the late 1970s and into the 1980s (Long, 2012). Efra, an activist in her early twenties, illustrated this stance:

I identify as a radical feminist and by this I mean that I want to end the patriarchy and capitalism which both work together to oppress and exploit women. My feminism regards prostitution, pornography, lap dancing etc. as forms of violence against women and definitely NOT work. [emphasis in original] (Efra)

### **Radical Feminists Define Radical Feminism**

In order to address the arguments presented earlier by Rees (2010) and York et al. (1991), regarding the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of radical feminism, I asked radical feminists themselves how they would define radical feminism. Participants emphasised the importance of an analysis of patriarchy, as Eve and Cordelia explained. Eve was a 35-year-old university lecturer living in Yorkshire, and she had been active in the WLM for nearly three years. Cordelia was a 63-year-old retired architect residing in London.

That [Radical Feminism] means challenging patriarchy, seeing patriarchy as a structure and trying to fundamentally alter that structure; it's not about tinkering about the edges, it's not about faffing about, or working within patriarchy. (Eve)

If you say you're a "Rad Fem", you're about changing the whole of patriarchy; changing the whole system, you know, going right back to, you know, the roots. What are the roots of all these issues, and none of this tinkering at the edges. (Cordelia)

This theme of total system change was frequently raised by participants. It was suggested, though they did not usually name other schools of feminism explicitly, that some articulations of feminism were flawed in remaining content to work within the current

system; a system which participants felt was largely irredeemable. Mary summarised this viewpoint, making reference to liberal feminism:

I'm a Radical Feminist. Well, it's about not wanting a piece of the pie; it's about wanting the whole cake. Well, I think I'm a bit kind of schizophrenic in that regard, not in a medical sense, but that during the day I'm a liberal feminist working to change the system and trying to get changes for women, but I think the whole system needs rebuilding from scratch, you know. I don't think you could reform the current system to a point where everyone was liberated because the system is the problem. I mean, we can tinker round the edges making some gains for some women, but, I mean, it's not the answer. (Mary)

Participants felt that some other articulations of feminism, including what they perceived as third wave, often retreat from problematising men and masculinity. In contrast, these radical feminists proudly asserted that radical feminism does not retreat from this, as argued by Sandy. Sandy was a 63-year-old local government officer from Yorkshire, an activist with a 30-year history in the WLM:

Radical feminism, that's about problematising men, not just being concerned with the economics; we've always been concerned with the economics, but we problematise men. [emphasis added] (Sandy)

Participants also explained what the term 'radical' meant to them, what this prefix before their feminism represented – and usually it denoted anger; an anger they felt was urgent, justified and taboo. As Charlotte summarised:

I don't know if I would have previously said that [identified as radical feminist] 'cos I didn't really know the difference, but basically it's through all of the aggression I've received about women-only [space], and the more I've done stuff, it's just changed the way I feel about it, and my friend said: "yeah, if we align ourselves anywhere it's with that"; because it's more militant, it's stronger; it sounds as angry as I am. (Charlotte)

Although outspoken about their radical feminist identity, all the participants were aware of prevalent stereotypes of feminists, and they discussed the challenges these stereotypes and attacks on feminism raised for their activism, in particular for women-only feminist activism.

### **Radical Women Only**

Participants stressed the role of autonomous women-only space in radical feminism; as the following quotes demonstrate, from Vivienne and Mandy. Vivienne was a 51-year-old full time carer resident in the Midlands who had been a feminist activist for over 20 years, and Mandy was a 65-year-old writer living in London who had been active in the WLM for over 30 years:

it's about dismantling all the patriarchal institutions that exist both formally and informally, and it's about loving women and being positive to women and putting women first, and that is a political and a personal thing. (Vivienne)

I think central to all feminism, to all Women's Liberation politics, is the idea that, you know, women themselves must be the ones to liberate women. And that women's experiences, I think this is key, women's experiences were the basis of our politics. (Mandy)

All the radical feminist participants perceived women-only space as currently under attack, and those with many years of activist experience suggested that such space has declined since the 1970s. As Vivienne explained:

There were lots of women-only events then [1980s], and in that decade. I don't think me or the women around me could imagine a time when there wouldn't be; we couldn't imagine having to fight for women-only space, we couldn't have imagined having to do that. I mean, that's an indication of the change, of, like, what was taken for granted, is now; I'm meant to feel like some sort of oppressor, 'cos I'm saying feminism should be women-only. That's a huge challenge. (Vivienne)

Charlotte gave examples of the current challenges she faced from her peers when organising women-only spaces in the contemporary feminist movement in the UK, and recounted being regularly critiqued for not including men:

Women need to have the opportunity to get together with other women to discuss things that affect women. But, you know, I say I go to my feminist book group, and it's a women-only book group, and friends will say: "oh I thought it was a feminist book group", and I'll say: "well yes it is, and this one's women-only, and if you want to organise a mixed one then why don't you go and do it, I just started this one up on my own". Well, my friend used to work on an anti-vivisection stall and she said nobody ever came up to her and said: "what about the dolphins". (Charlotte)

Emmeline, a 64-year-old retired teacher, asserted that such challenges of women-only space often call into question the sexuality of the person promoting women-only space, aligning women-only feminism with lesbianism and proffering that the latter is an undesirable feature:

I think there's a sort of fear of feminists, of weirdo lesbians. (Emmeline)

A variety of reasons for preferring women-only organising were put forward. Sometimes, participants were unable to express specific reasons, feeling that women-only feminist activism was a case of 'stating the obvious', as Bronwyn, an activist in her late twenties, illustrated:

Women also really NEED women-only spaces within the movement, it's so vital politically and personally for so many reasons. I can't really answer this question; it's so obvious and instinctual to me. [emphasis in original] (Bronwyn)

When reasons *were* translated, these ranged from feeling that women-only spaces were more supportive and conducive places within which to discuss and analyse experiences of sexist oppression, particularly male violence; or feeling that retrograde gender roles are so

hard to escape that in mixed political spaces women can be restrained from taking on leadership posts, or more technical, public or confrontational tasks, in deference to men's domination of such roles.

The radical feminist participants also argued that women-only organising fostered solidarity amongst women, in a climate which they felt often attempted to divide women. As Kira explained:

something I think is so important to feminism in general, not just to RTN, but, about coordinating action and meeting other women and working together as women towards a common goal. There's so much divide and rule and kind of, like, commentary about women not being able to work together and being like "bitchy" and grumpy, and it's through feminism I've met so many amazing women and had so many exciting or emotional things that have changed my perspective on things.  
(Kira)

The findings presented above shed light on the political perspective of some radical feminists in the contemporary WLM and some challenges they identify for their own efforts in feminist activism. Participants raised critiques of neo-liberalism, third-wave feminism, choice feminism and liberal feminism, often aligning their own politics with those of second-wave feminism. They championed women-only space and focussed much of their activism on male violence against women, including pornography and prostitution.

### Third Wave – Ideological Not Generational?

The surfacing of a self-defined and recognisable new wave of feminism could suggest the demise and/or rejection of the previous wave. As claims to a third wave are occurring alongside a continuing feminist movement, which contains feminists, such as those in my study, whose activism began in previous decades, as well as younger feminists aligned to the second wave, the waves would appear to be overlapping. What is arguably occurring therefore, with *some* articulations of third-wave feminism, is a *rejection* of the previous wave, rather than a *replacement* following a death by natural causes. Some third wave writing does appear to define itself reductively against a simplistic and caricatured portrayal of second-wave feminist theory and practice. This caricatured portrayal is often similar to the accusations charged at radical feminism generally: that it is racist, homophobic, humourless, prudish 'anti-sex', 'man-hating', outdated and essentialist (for a discussion of such charges, see Kinser, 2004; Scanlon, 2009). Such portrayals, like a hall of mirrors, distort the image of the feminist until it is unrecognisable to most feminists. Orr (1997) points out that such caricatures are invoked and promoted despite the existence of much evidence to the contrary, not only in historical accounts of the second wave but in the current activism and writing of contemporary feminists who align themselves with the second wave. This is a habit of misrepresentation which Orr blames on the general reification of youth and consumerism in contemporary neo-liberal society: 'It may be that consumer culture has rendered "new and improved" much more enticing than "historically informed"' (Orr, 1997, p. 33).

Many of the radical feminists in my study were aged in their twenties and thirties, yet they rejected the 'new and improved' version of feminism that they attached to the term third wave, and instead positioned themselves very strongly with second-wave feminism.

These radical feminists did not want to be branded as third wave feminists simply because of their age; they vehemently disagreed with the political ideology that they associated with third-wave feminism as they saw it. In identifying themselves strongly with the second wave, they opposed any assertion of generational divides between feminists and they proposed that divides between feminists were due to politics and ideology rather than age. As radical feminist academic Dines (2012) explains passionately:

The battles are not between generations or waves (as some would argue) but between those who adopt a radical understanding of power, institutions, capitalism, empire, and liberation, and those who seek safety in a more liberal, don't-rock-the-boat ideology that celebrates individual empowerment over collective social change. No surprise that this appeals to the more privileged group of women, since they have been the ones to benefit most from the crumbs thrown to women post-1960s.

### **Radical Feminism and Her Enemies**

Third-wave feminism has obviously originated in very different circumstances to the feminism of the 1970s and 1980s; being birthed in the effervescent 1990s as neo-liberalism tightened its stranglehold on all areas of society, areas which have been progressively handed over to market rule (Duggan, 2003). The machinations of Western capitalism in this period both built on and promoted masculinist notions of the individual as a rational agent engaged in the occupation of life. In so doing, the existence and effects of structural social forces outside the individual were foreclosed, even as they continued to exert their influence with arguably increasing brutality. From a neo-liberal perspective, however, the individual alone is responsible for any such brutal, negative effects. As Baker (2008, p. 60) explains: 'Self-improvement and responsibility for one's own fate are so fundamental to late modernity and neo-liberalism that interpretations which emphasise self-determination are required in even the most testing situations.' As argued by the radical feminists in my study, this perspective has led to the possibility and practice of individual 'choice' becoming almost a religion in current Western society (see: Salecl, 2010); and the participants often associated this particularly with third-wave feminists and third-wave feminism.

This influence of neo-liberalism, plus the ramifications of an ongoing backlash against the gains of the WLM (Faludi, 1992), were seen by participants to have contributed to the development of choice feminism (Ferguson, 2010). This is a weak and depoliticised version of feminism which asserts that power for women lies in their capacity to make choices, regardless of what those choices are, what influences may lie behind them, what environment they are made in or what consequences they may have. Participants in my study complained that practices they viewed as anti-feminist could be defended in the current climate as a woman's choice, thus silencing any critique. The radical feminist participants argued that this type of choice feminism does nothing to undermine a patriarchal status-quo in which women, and younger women in particular, are called upon to define themselves as empowered neo-liberal subjects through their consumer practices, or 'choices', in every sphere of life (Ferguson, 2010; Rudolfsdottir & Jolliffe, 2008). These consumer practices were thought to, perhaps inevitably, maintain hegemonic heterosexualised femininity, even perhaps when they were practiced by those identifying

with alternative spaces and subcultures, such as those of third-wave feminism (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

### **True or False; Feminist Archetypes and Stereotypes**

The radical feminists in my study highlighted the difficulty of being activists in such an environment described above; they perceived hostility to a strong, political feminism generally, but especially to radical feminism. They keenly felt the power of negative stereotyping and recounted wrestling with this on a regular basis in interactions with their peers. As noted, their promotion of women-only space often seemed to provoke hostility. Participants were accused of being oppressive for engaging in women-only organising, and their gender identity, sexuality and relation to men was called into question. The image of the feminist as a man-hating, hairy-legged lesbian has achieved almost universal currency (Baker, 2008; Budgeon, 2001; Rich, 2005; Scharff, 2010). It is important that, of all the different schools of feminism, these are all images arguably most associated with radical feminism. While feminism has become mainstreamed, and focussed on gender rather than sex, certain articulations of feminism, usually liberal articulations, have become widely acceptable, generally those concentrated on legal equality within what McRobbie (2009) terms ‘an otherwise more or less unaltered social order’ (p. 14), while more radical versions of feminism are maligned and marginalised.

To summarise the earlier discussion then, radical feminism often appears to act as some form of standard bearer for lines crossed, representing an extreme, evangelical, transgressive and isolated destination at which, it is insinuated, nobody would wish to arrive. This is the destination at which the imagined man-hating, hairy-legged lesbian separatist merrily alights. This caricature functions to limit women’s choices with regard to feminist politics, by attaching a price to the adoption of a more radical feminist stance, a stance commonly associated with the rejection of men: sexually, politically, socially or domestically, which, in patriarchal society, may result in reprisals (Hesford, 2005). Reprisals such as those recounted by the participants in my study: being questioned about one’s gender identity and sexuality, and/or having assumptions made about one’s sexuality, being subjected to verbal harassment or physical harassment, threats or violence. By making a caricature out of such political positions, these positions are also defused of power, in an attempt to render ridiculous, fictional and laughable the valid and very real politics of separatism, the sexuality of lesbianism and the principle of autonomous women-only organising.

The harassment experienced by participants is perhaps testimony to the powerful and enduring presence of homophobia in contemporary society, at least with regard to female homosexuality. Ironically, the popular stereotyping of feminists, often attached to radical feminism in particular, arguably results in the exorcism and silencing of actual radical feminist activists, while imagined radical feminist spectres are invoked on a regular basis to police the feminism of a new generation and limit their options for political (and perhaps sexual) identification.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, radical feminists are active in the current phase of the British WLM, whatever this phase may be called by observers – whether a third wave, a resurgence or a

continuation of the second wave. Some of these activists are first-generation radical feminists, incubated in the second wave and still active today. Some are younger radical feminists, too young to have experienced the second wave. Participants experienced and suffered stereotyping and harassment due to their political identity, which often became most vicious or overt when promoting women-only spaces.

In the face of such hostility, these radical feminists proudly defined their brand of politics by their promotion of autonomous women-only organising, and also by their problematising of patriarchy and their focus on male violence against women, including the violence of pornography and prostitution. The participants felt that these elements set apart their feminism from other schools of feminism, including what they perceived as third-wave feminism.

It could be seen as simply semantics, whether one refers to the current phase of feminism as third wave or not, as, either way, an exciting resurgence of diverse feminism and feminist activism certainly appears to be taking place in the UK (Emmott, 2013). Within it are feminist activists of a variety of definitions or none, and while some may attach negative ideologies to what they perceive as third-wave feminism, some may be unaware of such debates or identify as third wave in a purely chronological sense. Likewise, others may consciously identify as third wave for ideological reasons, and proudly associate that label with a pro-porn stance, or with a commitment to mixed organising and the involvement of men, for example. However, as this current phase of the UK WLM also includes feminists, such as those in my study, who explicitly do not wish to be identified as third-wave feminists, because of the politics they associate with this term, I suggest that self-identification must be respected. In order to respect the huge variety of feminist self-definitions therefore, I suggest that media commentators, and indeed scholars, should underline that the term third wave carries not only chronological meaning, but, for many feminists, holds ideologies that they care not to be associated with in any way, and in fact define their own politics against.

## Note

1. Published works by Black feminists, including many radical feminists, can be viewed in a variety of sources, much of which are online in the current WLM, coming from bloggers and commentators, but I would also refer the reader to collected works in the explicitly radical feminist publications: *Trouble & Strife* magazine (2009) and Bell and Klein's (1996) reader '*Radically Speaking*'.

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