

Who's Afraid of Third Wave Feminism?

ON THE USES OF THE 'THIRD WAVE' IN BRITISH FEMINIST POLITICS

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Abstract

This article addresses some issues related to the question of the 'third wave' within contemporary British feminism, situating British debates within an international context. My argument is that existing accounts of third wave feminism treat it either in terms of what the term means to the author, or it is treated as a coherent and easily recognizable movement or set of positions within contemporary feminism. By contrast, I adopt an approach drawn from poststructuralist discourse theory which emphasizes the diverse and overlapping ways in which the notion of a 'third wave' is appropriated by academics and activists alike. From this theoretical base, I trace two different conceptions of the 'third wave' – one referring to a poststructuralist and post-colonial 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. The second half of the article develops a critique of the 'generational paradigm' of third wave feminism, drawing on interviews with activists and postcolonial academic perspectives.

Keywords

activism, discourse, generation, third wave, UK

Few concepts and debates within feminist theory and practice have caused more unease than the characterization of post-1900 Euro-American feminist history as a series of three discrete 'waves'. Indeed, much recent feminist theory has been devoted to unravelling the constituent elements of the 'third wave'. However, this article contends that there is something troubling about the way debates about the 'third wave' have been formulated. For one, there are surprisingly few literatures that have as their referent substantive empirical instances of 'third wave' feminism in action, in contrast to a

general outline of what the 'third wave' means to the author(s). Also, there is something problematic about the way authors typically approach the 'third wave' as if it were a discreet, clearly identifiable entity that can be described in a simple referential fashion. By contrast, the key theme running through this article is that the 'third wave' is an essentially contestable signifier that may be taken up and *used* by feminist academics and activists in a plurality of different ways. Running throughout this article, therefore, is the notion of *contested meanings* of the 'third wave'. I do this primarily via an empirical analysis of the multiple ways the concept has been used by activists in the contemporary British context. Given the dearth of research on either contemporary British feminism in general, and uses of the 'third wave' in particular, such an endeavour has an intrinsic interest. However, by situating British debates in an international context, my aim is to trace the development of dominant understandings of the term 'third wave' and offer some critical insights into the notion of a 'third wave' and the wave periodization more generally.

Drawing on general literature largely from the USA, and an empirical analysis of the 'third wave' in the UK, as well as critiques of the 'wave' periodization from multiple sources, I argue that the 'third wave' can at times inject renewed vigour and critical vibrancy into a feminist project. In theoretical terms, I argue that in this context it makes sense to liken it to an 'empty signifier' in the work of post-structuralist thinker Ernesto Laclau (1990, 1996, 2005). However, my claim is that these potentially radical and threatening dimensions of the 'third wave' have come to be largely undermined by the tendency to think of 'the third wave' as referring in relatively simple terms to a clearly delineated generational cohort of feminists. Such an approach is, I argue, problematic in that it domesticates feminism's capacity to be a dynamic and disturbing political force, it risks reinscribing a specifically Euro-American feminist historiography as hegemonic, risks imposing artificial and divisive cleavages between feminists, and may also lead to a complicity with certain hegemonic post/anti-feminist discourses. I shall flesh out these claims by providing a short overview of existing affirmations and disputations of the 'third wave' in the literature, while the bulk of the article will detail findings from an empirical analysis of the use of the signifier 'third wave' in the British context, before concluding with some critical assessments of current dominant uses of the term.

I acknowledge that in pitching the argument in these terms, one encounters two specific problems. First, in treating the 'third wave' as a discursive resource rather than a substantive entity one runs the risk of casting it as so insubstantial as to be impossible to analyse. However, as I shall make clear, while there is confusion and a lack of clarity about what the 'third wave' refers to, uses of the term do nonetheless cluster together in such a way as to identify several dominant tendencies within the 'third wave' lexicon. However, perhaps more problematic is the way in which, in critically analysing uses of the third wave by activists, one may argue that this article presupposes that academics

can and will 'dictate' language use to feminist activists. While acknowledging that this is a danger, in many respects I seek to problematize a simple academic/activist divide. While essentially my intention is to make a contribution to academic knowledge of feminist activism, I also intend to open up a more reflexive and critical exchange about potential limitations of the 'third wave' discourse, without presupposing any sort of power relation between academics and activists. Indeed, in the British context at least, the activist community is cognizant of, and makes active contributions to, academic debates in such a way that it is difficult to draw a clean separation between academic and activist communities.

CONTESTED MEANINGS OF THE 'THIRD WAVE' IN AMERICAN FEMINISM AND ELSEWHERE

With these provisos out of the way, we may now proceed with an initial mapping of dominant notions of the 'third wave' within the literature. The discussion is grounded in a conception of politics – including feminist politics – as entailing the discursive construction of issues and identities, rather than seeing political activities and events as grounded in fundamental laws or mechanisms governing the constitution of society (Laclau 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). From this perspective, the signifier 'third wave feminism' (as with all signifiers) is taken to be ontologically open to having its meanings contested, shifted and reconstituted.

The notion of a 'third wave' within feminist theory originally gained currency in the late 1980s at a time when poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques of hegemonic feminist conceptions of womanhood and subjectivity were becoming increasingly prevalent. These theoretical developments also coincided with, and to a large extent overlapped with, critiques from black, 'third world' and postcolonial feminist perspectives of the parochialism of dominant conceptions of feminist politics and subjectivity (Dicker and Peipmeier 2003: 14; Gillis *et al.* 2007: xxiii). While in the past few decades the relationship between poststructuralism and postcolonial feminism has been by no means untroubled, there is a perception that they share(d) a certain commitment to openness, diversity and plurality that was perceived to be lacking in many dominant strands of second-wave feminism (Bulbeck 1998: 14; Mohanty 2003 [1991]). In this context, the 'third wave', rather than signifying a specific generational cohort, is instead used to refer to a specific theoretical position that emphasizes a commitment to a problematization of monolithic or 'essentialist' conceptions of female/feminist subjectivity.

Despite, as I shall outline, there having been a strong move towards thinking the 'third wave' from a specifically generational paradigm, the notion of a 'third wave' as indicating a theoretical position that opens up a space for a relativizing of white Euro-American feminist perspectives remains attractive to a diversity of feminists. While a number of recent contributions to edited

volumes on third wave feminism contain pieces critical of the 'third wave' from a postcolonial perspective, works by Darraj (2003) and Chakraborty (2007) highlight the potentiality of a 'third wave' to open up a space for broader transnational dialogue among feminist movements. While both are critical of the de facto tendency towards parochialism in some dominant strands of third wave feminism (addressed further below), there is nonetheless a continuing fidelity to the third wave commitment to challenging the universalizing tendencies that are arguably latent in certain strands of Euro-American feminist theory and practice.

However, the past ten to fifteen years seem to have witnessed a gradual shift away from a postcolonial/poststructuralist conception of the 'third wave' towards a stronger sedimenting of what we might call the 'generational paradigm' (Eisenhauer 2004: 82). This is typified by Baumgardner and Richards' (2000) classic third wave text *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future*, for which third wave feminism is closely tied into the ways in which certain feminist precepts have a popular purchase which was perceived to be lacking for previous generations. They contend that 'for anyone born after the early 1960s, the presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted. For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it – it's simply in the water' (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 17 – 18). For authors such as Baumgardner and Richards, therefore, the generational (as opposed to substantive) element of third wave feminism is what gives it its distinctiveness from the second wave.

Despite this, there have been a number of recent attempts by young American feminists to distance themselves from a simplistic generational reading of the relation between second and third waves. Lise Shapiro Sanders, for one, seeks to distance herself from a reading of the 'third wave' as a conservative, anti-second-wave 'post feminism', promulgating a conception of the 'third wave' as 'founded on second-wave principles', but with certain cultural and political differences (Sanders 2007: 5; see also Dicker and Peipmeier 2003: 5). While these works seek to move beyond a conception of a third wave position as one that is in opposition to the second wave, they nonetheless remain within the wave-based periodization of post-1900 feminist historiography which, as I shall argue shortly, yields a number of problems. One must however remain alert to the fact that these two modes of thinking the 'third wave' need not necessarily be radically in opposition to one another. Indeed, several existing 'third wave' literatures do, at some level, fit into both paradigms by situating themselves within a narrative of a shift from a universalizing, parochial second wave to an internationalist, open and diverse 'third wave' (Gamble 2001: 52; Dicker and Peipmeier 2003: 13).

While interesting, these works lack a more dynamic account of the different ways in which the lexicon of the 'third wave' can be taken up and used politically by feminist activists. To redress this imbalance, the following section shall shed further light on the multiple ways in which contemporary feminist

activists in the British context – who are literate in theoretical debates within feminism – have appropriated and contested the notion of a ‘third wave’ of feminism.

CONTESTED MEANINGS OF THE ‘THIRD WAVE’ IN THE BRITISH ACTIVIST CONTEXT

This section hopes to redress the lack of empirical work on the use of ‘third wave’ discourse by reporting findings from a qualitative study of a number of different feminist civil society groups in the UK. While my analysis is by no means exhaustive, it is noteworthy given that the notion of a ‘third wave’ is a key structuring point within the discourse of feminist activists in the UK, and as such merits critical attention. My study draws upon in-depth textual analysis and semi-structured interviews with people active within what are arguably the two largest and most significant feminist civil society groups within the current British context. These are, first, the Fawcett Society, a well-established campaigning organization with semi-formalized connections to various institutions of the local and national state and, second, the F-word website, which acts as a hub for news and comment among predominantly younger feminists in the UK.¹ Thus, while these two groups differ markedly in terms of their function and structure, they nonetheless share a commitment to a notion of a ‘third wave’ as a means of providing some semblance of discursive coherence to their diverse agendas. The Fawcett Society recently underwent a re-branding exercise in which it explicitly foregrounded its commitment to a ‘third wave’ of feminism, while during a 2006 colloquium on the ‘third wave’ in the UK, Catherine Redfern, the then editor of the F-word, opened her presentation by saying that ‘we (at the F-word) are the third wave, there is no more discussion about it’.

However, there are a number of different ways in which the lexicon of the ‘third wave’ is deployed. Within the F-word, and indeed its affiliated activist offshoot, the London Thirdwave Feminists, the term is invoked in a manner that, like some of the American texts alluded to above, is largely generational, in such a way that a ‘third wave’ openness and diversity is contrasted with a ‘second wave’ parochialism. Witness these accounts of what is understood by ‘third-wave feminism’ by users of the F-word:

I think it’s a very useful rallying point for young women and a way to stress feminism’s relevance for their own lives. It recognises that younger women’s lives are different from those of their foremothers.

(e-mail from F-word contributor)

Basically, it must define a generation of women who have grown up under the gains made by those 2nd wavers in the 60s/70s. This isn’t to say all the work has been done, it isn’t to deny the existence of a backlash, and it isn’t to say

that 3rd wavers have it all right but nevertheless, we grew up in a different world to that of our mothers – with different expectations, entitlements and oppressions, and I think this term acknowledges that.

(e-mail from F-word contributor)

Second wave theories never sat comfortably with my own brand of radical, leftist, feminist, queer activism. Third Wave is much more open to the challenge of overlapping and interlinking concerns.

(e-mail from F-word contributor)

While the Thirdwave is built upon the radical blocks of the second it also involves greater attention to diversity, deconstruction and overlapping positions.

(comment posted on the F-word, May 2006)

Thus, the picture we are offered is one in which the third wave is presented as signalling a generational shift, and also as indicating the emergence of a new and *inclusive* feminist agenda, with the implication that the ‘old’ feminism was perhaps less inclusive. Indeed, a palpable disaffection with certain aspects of second wave feminism is evident in an F-word contributor’s assertion that:

I have had experiences of being patronised because of my age . . . I think there was a sense of young feminists having to ‘serve their time’ in exactly the same way that patriarchal structures use that apprenticeship model which felt uncomfortable and denied a voice to me (and others).

(e-mail from F-word contributor)

At one level, therefore, as with the work of some American third-wavers such as Baumgardner and Richards, the term appears to refer solely to a generational shift without specifying any particular content to the concerns of the new generation of feminists. However, there is a sense that these generational divisions yield certain key cultural and political differences. Indeed, in the present British context, we can identify two key substantive dimensions of third wave feminism (see Redfern 2001a, 2002). First, the notion of a ‘third wave’ has come to have strong associations with a specific form of youth subculture (sometimes called the ‘Riot Grrr!’ movement) with its roots in a pro-feminist punk ethos, and associated with particular styles of music and clothing.² It has also come to be associated with specific viewpoints that may differ from established ‘second wave’ perspectives. For instance, third-wavers are 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 (see, for example, Forrest 2002a, 2002b; Smith 2003; Bateman 2007).

However, for the most part, these substantive differentiations from the ‘second wave’ are often presented as somehow secondary to, or reducible to, the overriding question of generational difference. Indeed, within the current British context, discussion of the ‘third wave’ seems largely overdetermined by a generational paradigm. This has arisen from the fact that the F-word

website – which has served, to some degree, to inject renewed vigour and energy into feminist activism in the UK – was set up specifically to provide a voice for younger feminists who felt alienated from both popular (mis)representations of feminism and also the perceived hegemony of an older generation within established feminism (Redfern 2001b, n.d.). This has the clear beneficial consequence of opening up a discursive space for younger feminists to become active and engage politically, but has the arguably less beneficial consequence of rendering contemporary UK feminism overdetermined by a generational paradigm.

This tendency became particularly apparent during two specific events. The first relates to the heated debate that ensued on the F-word over the relationship between the website and older feminists. When the site was initially set up in 2001, it was subtitled 'young UK feminism'. However, in 2003 this was – after considerable debate – changed to 'contemporary UK feminism'. The name change was prompted by a complaint from an older reader that the focus on younger women was discriminatory against older feminists. The term 'contemporary' was chosen in order to maintain its links with youth but also in order to make it seem less off-putting to older readers (see Redfern 2003). At some level, the actual process of discussion opened up space for critical exchange. However, rather than seeing these critical exchanges – which brought about a sharp increase in the liveliness of the site – as possessing an inherent value, they were cast as part of a teleological move towards a final discursive closure concerning the generational cohort that the site wishes to speak to (or for).

This issue resurfaced during the summer of 2006 following the publication of an article by Fawcett Society director Katherine Rake calling for a third wave of feminism (discussed below). Rake's article provoked a somewhat defensive response in some quarters, on the grounds that Rake was perceived to have ignored the fact that a 'third wave' already existed. Furthermore, one contributor wrote, in response to Rake, 'I find the idea that young women need older women to spearhead the third wave decidedly suspect' (e-mail to London Thirdwave yahoo group). Also, the current editor of the F-word wrote, in response to Rake:

While this is a laudable attempt to swell the ranks, Rake is calling for a third wave of feminism. If anything, she should be calling for a fourth wave. I hate to sound pernickety . . . but seriously, do we really need to re-invent the wheel yet again?
(McCabe 2006)

This seems to cast contemporary feminism as fundamentally a site of inter-generational conflict, almost to the point where the 'third wave' is presented as the preserve of a specific, generationally defined empirical group of women. While those on the F-word and London Thirdwave are undoubtedly correct to criticize Rake for having an insufficient awareness of the recent history of contemporary feminism, the level of defensiveness implies a sense

of ownership of the term 'third wave', such that the latter is seen as a subject position with a necessary relation to a specific group of women.

By contrast, within the recent political discourse of the Fawcett Society – arguably the most influential feminist campaigning organization in the UK at present – the term is used in a looser, but more radical and confrontational manner than the 'generational paradigm' which predominates in the examples described above. For the Fawcett Society, the signifier 'third wave' refers not to any one specific interpretation of feminism or aspect of a feminist agenda, but instead is used to provide a degree of coherence to a diversity of feminist political demands which, to some extent, is brought into existence at the moment of naming it as 'third wave'. Crucial here is that Fawcett underwent a large-scale re-branding in 2005, which brought about significant changes in the overall thrust of the organization. Prior to 2005, Fawcett typically framed their demands in terms of a 'gender equality' agenda, emphasizing, through the production of meticulously researched reports, points of convergence between Fawcett's demands and the Government's declared policy commitments and priorities. While these aspects have remained crucial to Fawcett, since 2005 it has taken an altogether bolder and more confrontational stance, embodied in a renewed willingness to frame their agenda as specifically feminist, and in doing so broadening its remit beyond just the campaign for legislative change, through, for instance: participation at the FEM conferences in Sheffield; organizing panel discussions on feminist issues at the 2006 and 2008 annual conferences of left-of-centre pressure group Compass; mass producing a T-shirt humorously bearing the slogan 'this is what a feminist looks like' and setting up a Myspace page.

In engaging more explicitly with these new modes of feminist activism in the UK, Fawcett director Katherine Rake has repeatedly emphasized that Fawcett is seeking to spearhead a 'third wave' of feminism. Crucial to this 'third wave' of feminism, says Rake (2006: 9), is that it 'must include those who feminism has failed to reach in the past, such as men, many ethnic minority women, and young women'. She claims that it is not intended to denigrate the first or second wave, but, instead, refers to how:

A lot of them [issues being discussed by contemporary feminists] are old issues but they have emerged anew, I think what we're hearing about is, I think a lot of younger women are into issues around personal safety, around body image, around the saturation of pornography in society, which are all actually old issues but I think that they have got a special urgency given what's happening, given the Internet, media and all the rest of that that gives it a special push at the moment.

(Katherine Rake, unpublished interview)

Thus, while Rake is perhaps a little vague in terms of the precise content of the term, in some respects it could be argued that this is necessary if it is to maintain its capacity as an umbrella term for a set of diverse feminist

demands. Indeed, in this respect, Fawcett's attempt to articulate its own agenda into a broader chain of equivalence³ with feminist concerns emanating from more autonomous, less institutionalized spaces (such as the F-word) is, for Rake, a crucial task for Fawcett. Here, she believes Fawcett can act as a national co-ordinator through which to group together the concerns of various feminist groups, serving to create a more explicit debate and create a broader 'feminist consciousness' (Rake, unpublished interview). Here, the invocation of a 'third wave' appears not to refer to a specific generationally defined group of feminists, although it maintains a degree of metaphorical resonance in suggesting the evolutionary development towards a more diverse and inclusive vision of feminism. Crucial here, though, is that the appeal to the signifier 'third wave' has, in this case, injected a liveliness and critical vibrancy into Fawcett's feminist agenda that was previously lacking. Indeed, the re-branding exercise in 2005 had the palpable consequence of injecting a renewed energy and commitment into the organization, made visible by the more energized atmosphere at the 2006 AGM (in contrast to the 2005 AGM which was rather more procedural) and the more lively appearance and design of its recently revamped magazine.

To summarize the issue in rather more theoretical terms, one could say that there are two different yet overlapping modes in which the 'third wave' is articulated within the current British activist context. In some stances – particularly within the Fawcett Society but also to a degree within the F-word and London Thirdwave – it becomes helpful to conceptualize the notion of a 'third wave' as an 'empty signifier' (following the poststructuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau) through which its various political demands and projects are articulated. In this context, *empty* signifiers refer to particular, privileged signifiers within emergent political agendas which become detached from their original meaning to assume a broader function of signifying a diversity of political demands (Laclau 1996: 38–9).⁴ Empty signifiers thus name and performatively bring into existence political agendas and identities that only existed rather tenuously prior to the moment of naming. When the generational dimension of the 'third wave' is underplayed, it may be helpful to conceptualize the term as an 'empty signifier' in the sense that it acts as something of an umbrella term, bringing about a modicum of unity and coherence to an otherwise diverse set of feminist issues, while at the same time maintaining a degree of openness providing room for critical exchanges among feminists. Using the signifier 'third wave' in this capacity thus helps inject a renewed vigour into feminist activism, opening up discursive space for new counter-hegemonic demands and identities to emerge.

The second tendency is to think the 'third wave' as a 'subject question', following the Arendtian feminist theory of Linda Zerilli. The subject question, according to Zerilli (2005: 9), refers to the continuing attachment within both feminist theory and substantive politics to agency conceived in terms of sovereignty and the singular will, with a bracketing out of plurality and

contingency. It presupposes a notion of politics as entailing clarity and mastery over one's actions. More substantively, this has the consequence that feminists risk becoming preoccupied with the question of sorting out politically and theoretically the *grounds* of the feminist subject prior to the moment of political engagement. In this context, I want to argue that some third wave feminists seem captured by the fantasy of the 'third wave' signifying a unified feminist subject without remainder. This is manifest in a general concern within the F-word and London Thirdwave – and to a slightly lesser extent the Fawcett Society – with establishing exactly who the groups are for, and to which feminist demographics they intend to address. Unlike the uses described above, in which the appeal to a 'third wave' performatively opens up space for a new feminist agenda with no necessary relation to any specific demand, issue or group of people, thinking the 'third wave' as a subject question entails a drive towards a discursive closure concerning what the term 'third wave' is intended to signify. Thus, I think it is helpful to view the generational paradigm of third wave feminism as a species of what Zerilli calls 'the subject question', which may yield a number of possibly unforeseen deleterious consequences for feminism, as detailed in the following section.

CRITIQUES AND DISPUTATIONS OF THE 'THIRD WAVE' IN BRITISH FEMINISM AND ELSEWHERE

In this section, I want to raise a number of critical comments relating to the tendency to think of the third wave as a subject question related to a specific generational demographic, drawing on both academic literature and concerns expressed by activists. It should be noted that there are a number of well-established critiques of the third wave. These include claims that it is insufficiently politically aware, is guilty of an insufficiently critical relation to hegemonic modes of popular culture and is essentially a feminism formed from the perspective of economically and racially privileged women (Greer 1999; Viner 1999; Taft 2004; Garrison 2007). These critiques are targeted at 'third wave feminism' as a discrete and identifiable set of 'positions' within feminism. However, the criticisms advanced here are based on analyses of context-specific instances of the use of the term 'third wave'. As such, the following critiques pertain not to a general critique of third wave feminism in toto, but to the tendency to think the 'third wave' from a somewhat simplistic and divisive generational paradigm. While acknowledging that they overlap to a considerable degree, I shall, for the purposes of expediency, deal with four specific problems with thinking the 'third wave' from the generational paradigm, which I shall deal with in turn. While the critiques are analytically separable, they all speak to the notion that the generational paradigm of third wave feminism serves, in a variety of ways, to undermine, domesticate and restrict the potential radicalism and vibrancy of contemporary feminist politics. As

with sections above, the four problems discussed below are derived primarily from a qualitative analysis of the British feminist context, augmented with literature from elsewhere.

Undermining the Complexity of Post-1900 Feminist History

There is nothing intrinsic to the 'wave' metaphor that dictates that it is of necessity simplistic and divisive. As Howie and Tauchet point out, the wave metaphor is potentially an effective way of capturing the fluid and unpredictable character of feminist history, given that waves are complex phenomena implying disturbance and sudden movement. As they put it, 'to perceive a wave at all, we artificially arrest the movement by which it is constituted, and separate out *one of myriad* manifestations of that movement,' such that the wave metaphor 'runs the risk of simplifying the tradition it is called upon to describe' (Howie and Tauchet 2007: 46, emphasis in original). However, the tendency to use the 'third wave' as signifying a specific generational cohort, one can argue, does violence to the unpredictable, diverse and 'disturbing' qualities to feminist politics. By imputing a somewhat simplistic generational progression onto late twentieth-century feminist history, one inevitably domesticates the diversity of feminism during these periods.

Indeed, variations on this critical theme have emerged repeatedly among British feminist activists uncomfortable with the implications of the way the lexicon of the 'third wave' is used. One F-word contributor, in an e-mail exchange, highlighted how the use of the 'wave' metaphor may run the risk of complicity with mainstream society's readings of feminist history, on the grounds that each 'wave' refers simply to periods when mainstream society has afforded greater attention to feminism. Similarly, one contributor to the London Thirdwave mailing list who was active during the 'second wave' pointed out how the 'wave' metaphor – with its implication that feminist divisions take place across time, undermines the diversity of political standpoints among feminists at any given point (interview with London Thirdwave contributor). Indeed, the concern that the 'wave' metaphor undermines the vibrancy of feminist history is spelt out with particular verve by one contributor to the F-word who wrote that:

The problems with conceptualising feminist movements in 'waves' is that it serves to obscure our histories and political agendas. The 'first wave' is thought synonymous with suffrage, and thus 'early feminism' becomes a 'single issue' – the right to vote. But, our feminist heritage is far more complicated than this – to talk of waves, not only ignores the continuous stream of women's activism and antagonism across the ages, it also places a conceptual/discursive gag on inter-generational politics. Are older women, by default, excluded from the workings and actions of the 'third wave'? Do we, as feminists, have an expiry date?

(comment posted on the F-word, n.d.)

These comments from research participants draw attention to the way in which an uncritical acceptance of the 'third wave' within its specifically generational mode may have a number of unintended effects that serve to undermine the very complexity, diversity and problematizations that the invocation of a 'third wave' was initially supposed to open up.

Reinscribing the Hegemony of a Euro-American Reading of Feminist History

While the critiques above allude to a simplification of feminist history in terms of temporality, the overdetermination of feminist history by the 'wave' metaphor also runs the risk of ossifying a spatially specific (and arguably inaccurate!) feminist history *as* feminist history in toto. This comes to light from the way in which a number of activists and academics have highlighted the spatial specificity of the 'wave' metaphor and the various dangers associated with this. From within the British context, it has been claimed by activists that the 'third wave' is essentially an American import which has been adopted uncritically in the British context, despite the existence of potential problems relating to the transferability of concepts between the American and British contexts. Furthermore, one activist pointed out that 'it ignores the continuous stream of women's activism and antagonism across the ages, and indeed across the globe (it's quite telling that 'waves' more readily refers to contemporary Western feminisms)' (comment posted on the F-word, n.d.).

In a similar vein, a number of recent edited collections relating to the viability of third wave feminism have, from a variety of perspectives, highlighted the spatial specificity of the generational 'wave' narrative. In an interesting essay detailing aspects of contemporary Polish feminism, Agnieszka Graff described how from a Polish perspective, the second/third wave narrative simply does not apply in the Polish context by virtue of an absence of a recognizable women's movement prior to the demise of communism. Furthermore, Graff writes how the coexistence in Poland of what, from an Anglo-American perspective, might be seen as 'third wave' strategies to achieve 'second wave' goals calls into question the applicability of a temporal move from a second to a third wave to non Anglo-American contexts (Graff 2007). In a piece in the same volume, but speaking in more general terms, Winifred Woodhall (2007: 156–8) draws attention to how, during times of increasing movement of people, goods and information across national borders, third wave feminism must shake off its parochialism – rooted as it is in the global north – and embrace the 'internationalism' which she cites as having characterized the 'second wave'. All these critiques allude to the way in which the 'third wave' – which was initially intended to signify partly the postcolonial critique of the second wave – has, paradoxically, ended up becoming guilty of the very thing it was intended to critique, by adopting an insufficiently critical awareness of the spatial specificity of the first/second/third/wave narrative.

A Drift towards Divisiveness between Feminists and a Complicity with Hegemonic Gender Discourses

An excessively strong generational reading of the 'third wave' may lead to a perhaps unintentional drift towards divisiveness between different generational cohorts of feminists. As previously noted, the F-word was initially set up to pursue the commendable aim of giving younger feminists a voice. However, as we saw, the constitution of that voice as specifically 'third wave' has led to a somewhat excessive defensiveness and sense of ownership over the use of the 'third wave' term such that, when the Fawcett Society began appropriating it, there was a sense among some F-word contributors that Fawcett was stealing 'their' feminism. This, however, has the consequence of leading to a preoccupation with feminist subjectivity at the expense of opening space for critical exchanges about the substance of British feminist politics. As one contributor to the F-word pointed out,

I feel a bit nervous that some of the posts declaiming Rake's article as ignoring the 3rd wave are veering towards driving a wedge between feminists ... The vision that Rake outlined in her article was clear and I think it is one we can all sign up to.

(e-mail to London Thirdwave yahoo group)

A further way in which thinking the 'third wave' in generational terms is problematic is that, normatively and historically, it might suggest that the second wave is redundant and needs to be replaced with a qualitatively distinct mode of feminism. Indeed, one contributor to the F-word and London Third-wave, named Finn MacKay, herself a prominent feminist activist and founder of the London Feminist Network,⁵ has strongly argued for a reaffirmation of second wave values and priorities. In an email exchange, she commented:

I have always had a personal problem with the term third wave, because I don't think the second wave is over yet. We are still living in a defensive time of strong backlash against the gains made by the second wave women's liberation movement. What we are doing is still defending those gains and trying to advance the very same goals spelt out then, the seven demands, which we still have not achieved, the extent of the backlash and the force of it is an indication of the threat posed by second wave feminism so I think we should carry on and finish the job.

(Finn MacKay, e-mail, 9 February 2007)

These critiques point towards the danger of closing down debate, discussion and possibilities for feminist politics by invoking a notion of a historical shift from a second to a third wave that perpetuates divisive distinctions between groups of feminists. The charge that the 'third wave' has caused unnecessary generational divisiveness is well established within feminist theory (Henry 2003; McRobbie 2009: 156–9). However, the consequences of

this generational division often remain unexplored. Here, I want to argue that the tendency to think of the third wave as specifically referring to young women, indeed sometimes even a particular group of young women is such that it may have further detrimental consequences relating to the relationship between feminism and hegemonic gender discourses.

This arises from the fact that, within the generational paradigm of third wave feminism, there is, of course, some sort of an identification with second wave feminism, whereas on another level the very identity of the 'third wave' is predicated on its distancing from second wave feminism. As Astrid Henry (2003: 215) points out, third-wave feminists' 'simultaneous identification with and rejection of second-wave feminism is what grants them an identity to call their own'. She writes: 'paradoxically, many of these third-wave writers attempt to recreate the exhilaration and freedom of the feminist past by breaking away from feminism' (2003: 220).

Henry argues that third wave feminists cast themselves in a relation of 'disidentification' with second wave feminism. Henry's use of the term is drawn from Judith Butler's work on processes of repudiation in the formation of gendered subjectivities, and is used to describe a process by which subjects distance themselves from an identification which one fears to make '*only because one has already made it*' (Butler 1993: 112, emphasis added). My contention is that this same logic is at work in the third wave feminist (non-)identity with second wave feminism. Perhaps more significantly, I want to contend that this same logic of disidentification with second wave feminism is prevalent within hegemonic discourses on contemporary feminine subjectivity.

These issues are most cogently spelt out in the recent work of Angela McRobbie, who argues that the dominant relationship between young women and feminism is one of disidentification. She highlights how feminism has been mainstreamed into a wide variety of institutions throughout civil society, such that feminism is 'taken into account' across a wide variety of domains. However, this very 'taken into accountness' occasions the *undoing* of feminism by invoking it as something no longer relevant and necessary. McRobbie (2004: 7) argues that within the context of a widespread acceptance *and* disavowal of feminism, to 'count' as a girl today requires, she argues, a 'ritualistic denunciation' of feminism. This dialectic between 'taken into accountness' and disavowal can be usefully captured in the term 'post-feminist disidentification'.⁶

In post-feminist discourse, therefore, the fear of the feminist arises from the fact that, at some level, an identification *with* the feminist has in fact already been made. Thus, the tendency to think of third wave feminism as a specifically young feminism separate from the second wave could be seen as tying in with a logic of disidentification with second wave feminism which is in fact complicit with dominant post/anti-feminist discourses. In this sense, the characterization of second wave feminism as domineering, prescriptive and constraining invokes the very same mythical figure of the (hairy, dungaree-clad) feminist invoked in post/anti-feminist discourse.

CONCLUSION: WHO'S AFRAID OF THE THIRD WAVE?

Overall, therefore, my sense is that we require a much more sustained critical engagement with the 'generational paradigm' of third wave feminism. Paradoxically, a term that was initially – and indeed still is – invoked to signify a shift away from the perceived parochialism of second wave feminism, has itself perhaps become guilty of undermining both the radicalism and the openness that it is called upon to open up. While there is perhaps nothing intrinsic to suggest that to think in terms of waves implies conflict, in the present context there is a strong tendency when using the wave metaphor to cast contemporary feminism as *fundamentally* a site of intergenerational conflict. Thus, the attachment to a third wave subjectivity risks undermining the threatening and radical dimensions of feminism by casting it in terms that are complicit with hegemonic heteronormative models of conflict between women. This risks rendering feminism unthreatening, indeed perhaps even comical, from the point of view of an anti-feminist onlooker.

Thus, the notion of a 'third wave' which was originally called upon to inject a degree of openness, diversity and internationalism into feminism, risks – when used within the generational paradigm – reinscribing the hegemony of a specifically Anglo-American reading of feminist history, which, as we have seen, may have limited applicability to other contexts. However, more problematic still is the way in which the generational wave paradigm perhaps undoes that which is most radical and threatening about feminism: by imposing a simplistic evolutionary history onto feminism one may argue that it domesticates feminism's radical potential as an irruptive, disturbing and unpredictable political force.

To avoid any confusion, the purpose of this article is not to dictate that feminists should abandon any usage of the wave metaphor. Rather, it is simply a plea for a more open debate about the potential usefulness and potential costs of invoking a notion of a 'third wave', in opposition to the generally rather lazy and unreflexive appropriations of the term that tend to predominate. While I concede that the notion of a 'third wave' may be useful under specific circumstances, I would conclude by echoing Ednie Kaeh Garrison's (2007: 195–6) sentiments that 'if the generational consensus has solidified around third wave feminism as just a nifty moniker for a specific age cohort, then I am not one. I refuse to walk such an easy, superficial road'.

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Notes

- 1 For a more detailed analysis of the current practices of the F-word and the Fawcett Society, see Dean (2010).
- 2 For a comprehensive account of the Riot Grrrl movement, see Blase (2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b).
- 3 A chain of equivalence comes about when a series of disparate elements are articulated together into an equivalential chain which derives its unity from its being *in opposition* to a further element (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 128). In this context, the 'chain of equivalence' refers to the creation of a relatively unified feminist agenda, consisting of a variety of demands, under the banner – the empty signifier – of a 'third wave' of feminism. In this case, the opposing element is generally not clearly spelled out, but seems to be the hegemonic assumption that feminism is outmoded and unpopular.
- 4 A classic example of this is the Solidarity movement in Poland. Whereas at the outset the signifier 'Solidarność' referred only to the specific demands made by the striking shipyard workers in Gdansk, the term became gradually emptied as it assumed an umbrella function as a signifier that brought together a series of disparate demands against the Polish establishment (Laclau 2005: 226).
- 5 The London Feminist Network (LFN) organizes various types of feminist activism, most notably the now annual Reclaim the Night marches, which have proved to be very successful. The LFN is much more explicit than London Thirdwave in its identification with second wave feminism and is also an unambiguously women-only organization.
- 6 For more empirical analyses of processes of disidentification with feminism (though not necessarily pitched in those terms), see Tibballs (2000), Howard and Tibballs (2003), Griffin (2004), Jowett (2004) and Aapola *et al.* (2004). For an account of different modes of post-feminist disidentification, see McRobbie (2007).

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