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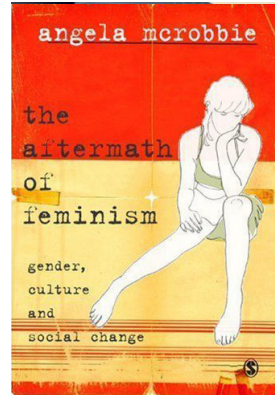
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# *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*

Angela McRobbie

Sage Publications Ltd, London (2009)  
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Reviewed by: NATALEE TUCKER



Bridget Jones Diary, Sex in the City, make-over reality television, and pole-dancing workout videos. How do these examples of popular culture use feminist rhetoric to “undo” feminist gains? This is the question Angela McRobbie explores in, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. This book focuses on cultural forces that have negated feminism as a social movement by examining the post-feminist cultural environment. This book is not an empirical work, but rather a survey of changes in popular culture.

McRobbie analyzes the ways in which popular culture is used to dismantle feminist gains. Popular culture is a site where feminism is “undone.” One method of “undoing feminism” is by depicting it as a fixed and frightening movement situated in the historical past. Additionally, popular culture uses the rhetoric of feminism to make it appear that young women and institutions no longer need it. McRobbie is not arguing that feminism has disappeared, rather it is part of popular culture, has been “taken into account,” so as to negate the need for feminist critique of society. She is particularly interested in the future of feminism outside of academic institutions.

McRobbie amends previous optimism she felt in the 1990’s about the potential for women’s magazines to support feminist goals. Rather, these magazines follow popular trends, so when feminism falls out of fashion, the magazines fall in line. McRobbie points out that magazines are constantly reinventing themselves in order to maintain circulation and advertising numbers. Within popular culture, anti-feminist and feminist agendas co-exist. McRobbie describes several examples of how these two philosophies exist side-by-side in society through the analysis of messages in popular culture, including Bridget Jones Diary and make-over reality shows.

McRobbie contends that the media is a key source of defining gender roles and establishing general ideas about feminist principles. One way that the media denounces feminism is through the portrayal of feminism as a historical movement that is out of date. Similar to the post-racial ideologies that insist race does not

play a role in life chances, the post-feminist ideology proposes that women are free to compete in academics and the economy without constraint. The underlying ideology prevalent in both cases is meritocracy, where individual

effort and agency are given privileged positions in understanding life chances. Acknowledgement of the historical need for feminism exists, but only to show that feminism is no longer needed. Objection to female discrimination and/or sexual exploitation is dismissed as something that is old-fashioned. Ideas from feminism are evoked in order to undo feminist critiques.

Post-feminist ideology is an exchange process, where women gain symbolic equality as long as they do not push for full political or meaningful equality. McRobbie argues that the potential of feminism to change society is great enough to cause anxiety in those who benefit from maintaining the status quo. Young women find that there are social and cultural rewards to rejecting feminism. These rewards include educational and occupational gains that are exchanged for a rejection of meaningful feminist political transformation. Traditional socialist-feminism, which critiqued the way capitalism oppressed women as a group is suspended. Instead, consumer culture uses feminist language by celebrating female power through the participation in consumerism. McRobbie explains this as a “double entanglement” where feminism is taken as common sense, but at the same time reviled. McRobbie posits that the current cultural climate is one that includes anti-feminist sentiment while incorporating feminist

terminology. This version of anti-feminist sentiment is different than feminist backlash, because the discourse includes elements of feminism within an individual framework.

In the first two chapters, McRobbie examines and builds on the idea of “double entanglement.” She explains that feminism as a social critique was actively undermined through popular culture while at the same time being included in some aspects of the same culture. This “undoing of feminism” is referred to as the “complexification of backlash.” Historically the “complexification of backlash” is the result of a double movement that began in the 1990’s when feminism begins to reevaluate itself at the same time that popular culture is saying that feminism is no longer needed.

McRobbie provides specific examples of how feminism is “undone” through popular culture. Mainstream acceptance of pornographic images is one example. Pornography is a traditional area of feminist critique. This critique of female exploitation is reversed, and young women increasingly support or at least refuse to condemn the normalization of pornography. The support is seen in women’s magazines where young women are encouraged to show their

“sexual freedom” through exposing breasts. Young women’s clothing might include phrases such as “Porn Queen” or “Juicy.” A sexually free woman might attend lap dances, and finds her empowerment in pole-dancing classes.

Women are now present in many social institutions and in high profile positions. These gains are used as evidence of female success. This is part of the

reason McRobbie argues that feminism has been “taken into account.” The feminist movement is displaced as a political movement because women are seen as able to fully participate in the workforce. Female economic gain is portrayed as the ability to fully participate in consumer culture. McRobbie uses the term “female individualization” to discuss the cultural shift toward individual ability to create

our own life plan. Individual ability and agency replace ideas of structural constraints. The common ideology is that individuals can create their own lifestyle, with little consideration of structural constraints. Within all these choices, there are common pathologies associated in popular culture with women’s freedom.

McRobbie contends that female pathologies are normalized as the price of freedom. Popular culture portrays what McRobbie terms “post-feminist gender anxieties.” These anxieties are expressed through the language of individual choice used to regulate women. These anxieties include concern about delayed marriage and motherhood, finding romance, and desires to have both a career and family. The character represented in *Bridget Jones Diary* is given as an

example of how feminism is taken into account, while focusing on the pathologies of too much female choice. Bridget is free to enjoy sexual freedom without a double-standard, to focus on a career and read post-modern theory – but she is not satisfied with this new freedom. These freedoms have caused latent consequences that may not be worth the gains. Bridget is anxious about her ability to find romance, husband, and family. Bridget wants to find a husband, have children, and be generally liked by the people in her office. In order to be liked at work and with friends, she takes sexist comments in stride, using humor to deflect rather than confront directly. Normalizing these post-feminist gender anxieties is one of the ways the popular culture works to “undo feminism.”

The *Aftermath of Feminism* is most appropriate for use in upper-level undergraduate or graduate level courses in feminist theory or popular culture. The text assumes the reader has advanced knowledge in social theory and feminist critique. The cultural examples used to illustrate McRobbie’s main points originate in the United Kingdom, but readers in the United States, particularly those from white, middle-class backgrounds, will recognize and relate to

many of these examples. The focus on white, middle-class youth culture is one a limitation of this analysis. Young women from low-income, working-class, rural, and/or different cultural backgrounds understand, experience and critique feminism in different ways. Poor women have not experienced the academic or economic gains of feminism. Combining work and family is a reality that is not a choice, but a historical reality and necessity.

When low-income, rural, or women of color are portrayed in popular culture, what feminist messages are “taken into account?” Are these images consistent with the “double entanglement” or “complexification of backlash” discussed by McRobbie? Are the “gender anxieties” expressed through these images similar to those portrayed in the examples given by McRobbie? These are questions whose answers might illuminate the complexities of the post-feminist cultural environment.