Conceptualising postfeminism: Transtemporal interaction as a bridge between history and ethics

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One way of approaching the various philosophical, political, epistemological and methodological implications of the grand project that is feminism is through a historical lens.[1] This does not necessarily bring us closer to a unitary definition (and we could argue that is not the goal), but it does provide us with certain tools for achieving what Christina Hughes refers to as a "conceptual literacy" (2002: p. 3), sensitising us "to the political implications of contestation over the diversity of conceptual meanings" (ibid.; see also Kohli and Burbules, 2013: p. 19). This paper argues that the essence of feminism lies in the complexity of the many voices, stances and often even opposing ideas stemming from a provisional commonality. A historical outlook allows us to explore the transformations of what could broadly be defined as feminist thought in different social, cultural and economic contexts. However, this paper tackles some of the arguments why analysing the history of feminism exclusively as a linear progression of different phases does not suffice. In examining the history of feminism, even the famous wave analogy has its downsides, namely excluding certain activities, places and social groups and assuming inevitable declines leading up to crests.[2] The temporality of feminism is thus a great starting point to outline the complexities of the movement, but going forward, it is the feminist substance, core values and ethics that should be the main focus.

1 An early draft of this article was presented at the Gender and Education Association Conference at Middlesex University, London, in June 2017, under a slightly different title.

2 For a more comprehensive critique of the wave theory, see Kohli and Burbules (2013: p. 23–24).

Nevertheless, this paper will begin somewhat teleologically and later highlight the importance of the heuristic and ontological dimensions of feminism. Feminist research has always taken an interest in the field of education as an area of important critical reflection. The focus of main feminist concerns in education has shifted through time. To quote Gaby Weiner (1995: p. 2–3):

> Feminists working in education have certainly moved forward in the last two decades from the position of having to provide evidence of female disadvantages and gender discrimination in order to enable girls' and women's issues to be placed on the educational agenda to articulating a value system and practice of feminist education that allows for greater sexual equality at the same time as acknowledging the differences that separate women.

In this regard, the important questions are those concerned with what different perspectives and strands of feminism have to offer and in what ways they could influence or deal with gendered relations of power in education, since particular forms of feminism can contribute to a myriad of different outcomes. Focusing on the field of education, the dimensions of the current postfeminist climate will first be examined and contextualised as a legacy of liberal feminism, based on dualistic logic. Discussing the inaccuracies of the popular postfeminist stance that feminism is no longer needed in today's society, an attempt at a possible reconceptualisation of postfeminism will be outlined. It will be grounded in the concept of transtemporal interaction proposed here, establishing open spaces for critical conversations and interactions with our foremothers and fellow contemporary feminists, while adopting and contributing to a set of feminist ideas needed in contemporary postfeminist society. By engaging in this, we acquire and disseminate different, more radical feminist ideas enabling us to use postfeminism as a "conceptual tool" to address the complex implications of various forms of feminism (such as liberal feminism) over time (Ringrose, 2007).

Conceptualising postfeminism

Conceptualising postfeminism: various definitions and liberal feminist heritage

There is an ongoing debate in feminist circles about postfeminism and how to conceptualise it. Is it a continuation of feminism or a historical break with it? The term is contested and has been thematised in various different ways: as a historical shift, as a backlash against feminism, to capture a sense of an epistemological break within feminism, suggesting alignment

with other "post" movements and to propose connections with the Third Wave, as Rosalind Gill (2016: p. 612) reminds us. Highlighting the social changes and the fact that feminism has a new visibility in popular culture, Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan call for new understandings on the ways in which "emergent feminisms" pose a "challenge to postfeminist media culture" (2015, in Gill, 2016: p. 611). They question the usefulness of the concept of postfeminism in a world where feminism no longer seems to be in retreat. Ann Brooks, meanwhile, understands postfeminism as an "expression of a stage in the constant evolutionary movement of feminism /that/ has gained greater currency in recent years" and is now seen as a "useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism" (2003: p. 1). Angela McRobbie, on the other hand, defines it as a "gender regime" undoing feminism (2009) or "an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined", making feminism a "spent force" (2004: p. 255). Building on this and answering to concerns voiced by Keller and Ryan, Rosalind Gill, who defines postfeminism as a "sensibility, deeply enmeshed with neoliberalism" (2016: p. 611), sees its relevance as an analytical category and believes it has a lot to offer in reading the current moment, aiming to show how some of the popular mediated feminism circulating is distinctively postfeminist in nature (ibid.).

Focusing on postfeminism in education, Jessica Ringrose (2007) shows how certain postfeminist discourses draw from liberal feminist theory. Liberal feminism's attention to equal rights was based on evidence of girls' underachievement in education. It campaigned for change, but change within the existing system and "with minimal disruption" (Weiner, 1995: p. 67). The primary goal of liberal feminism has been to alter attitudes, to change the treatment of girls in schools and to do so using legal practices (Acker, 1994, in Kohli and Burbules, 2013: p. 84). According to Weiner (1995: p. 54), liberal feminism has been the most generally accepted and long-lasting of all feminisms due to its modern terminology and focus on legal terms and mainstream values (such as equal access, equal opportunities and equal rights).

Simply by looking at the vast body of research regarding the ongoing moral panic about boys' underachievement in education (see Epstein et al., 1998; Francis and Skelton, 2005; Ringrose, 2007, 2013), it would seem that liberal feminism succeeded in its demands. The girls are discursively positioned as the winners of today's education systems and compared with the boys as the losers on the other side of a binary opposition. By narrowing the focus of gender debate in education solely on performance,

liberal feminism contributed to the celebratory postfeminist discourses about successful girls and sparked an over-concern with unsuccessful boys. Ringrose (2007: p. 473) points out how liberal feminist conceptualisation of gender as an abstract, stand-alone variable consolidates the dualistic logic and masks the complexity of a sociocultural context.

Some of the main liberal feminist concerns regarding the equality of opportunity in education have indeed largely been addressed (Skelton and Francis, 2009), but one cannot ignore Ringrose's critical assessment of liberal feminism's legacy in today's postfeminist society. Even where gender equality is legally and formally achieved, the everyday experiences of pupils and teachers speak of deeply rooted gender relations of power in education, letting us know that feminist ideas should not be regarded as obsolete. Today, more than ever, there is an evident need to address more radical feminist agendas illuminating how gender dynamics inform day-to-day practices in classrooms (ibid.). This could be done in a two-step process, with the final goals being:

- to establish active engagement with the work of our feminist foremothers,
- to formulate open and critical discussions with contemporary colleagues and
- to engage in inclusive interactions with young individuals, feminists of the future.

The concept of transtemporal interaction encompasses all these aspects. We will return to it after briefly discussing the two prerequisites needed to achieve it.

Conceptualising postfeminism: temporality, substance and relation to feminism

The first step in the process towards transtemporal interaction is to look past the temporal contextualization of postfeminism. Feminist history cannot be sufficiently comprehended as an evolutionary progression of historical phases. Moreover, if we understand the "post" in postfeminism as a historical break, we deem feminism dead. The temporal meaning of "post" itself indeed signifies the need for something to be exceeded. As Misha Kavka argues, the "'post' offers to situate feminism *in* history by proclaiming *the end* of this history", confirming feminist history "as something that we know to have existed because we can now say it no longer does" (2002: p. 30). However, is it even possible to consider society as postfeminist, knowing that gender is still one of the most important structuring factors? If we conceptualise postfeminism as something that

transcends the need for gender equality – that is, as a quality of post-gendered society, rendering feminist ideas obsolete –, we define it as an ideal towards which to strive. It is unfortunately apparent that contemporary society is far from this ideal and at times seems to be drifting even further from it. Postfeminism, if conceptualised in its temporal form, cannot be understood as anything else but a historical break with feminism and thus signifies the end of feminism as we know it. However, as Kavka reminds us, the problem with such conceptualisation is that feminism is not dead, though specific projects of feminism might have come and gone. Feminism today is very much alive, and we know this "not least from the existence of the very debates about the meaning of 'postfeminism'" (ibid.: p. 31).

By moving past a teleological understanding of feminist history, postfeminism is seen neither as a continuation of feminism nor as a historical break with it: it is not a new wave or the next phase, but rather becomes something else entirely. Defining postfeminism ontologically, it is the reflexivity about core feminist values, investments and goals that come to the fore. Nevertheless, even when focusing on substance alone, the very meaning of postfeminism is highly contentious, as Kavka (2002: p. 32) argues:

> The media has claimed it for the 'backlash' girls of conservative feminism; the Third Wave claims it for a younger generation of culturally savvy feminists /.../ ; poststructuralist academic feminists claim it for a pluralistic theoretical feminism that repudiates the supposed essentialism of the second wave; and 'I'm not a feminist but...' latecomers often claim it for a performatively wry and even light-hearted attitude to the self-serving proclamations of the masculine order. In social terms, there is also the complicitous form of 'postfeminism', in which women's sense of empowerment is tied directly into what could be called old patriarchal institutions /.../ The most worrying definition of 'postfeminism', however, belongs to that group of mostly younger women /.../ who believe that feminism has already done its work by achieving as much social equality for women in the home and workplace as one could hope or even wish for.

If we focus on "the most worrying" (ibid.) definition, the one positioning postfeminism in relation to feminism, it becomes evident that feminism cannot be understood as redundant in today's society. On the contrary, what contests this notion that feminism is no longer needed is precisely the new visibility and prominence of feminism. Emergent feminist issues, celebrity-sponsored campaigns (such as HeForShe), and topics

of sexism and sexual harassment (culminating in the #metoo movement) are all prominently featured in the media, and so are two specific versions of feminism that Gill (2016: p. 616–617) names "celebrity and style feminism" and "corporate or neoliberal feminism", which offers work on the self as a solution to injustice, diminishing the significance of mutual cooperation in achieving social and political transformation. But even though feminism is currently a popular term, or – perhaps better – precisely because of that, we have to be aware of the fact that "alongside all these different iterations of contemporary feminism is an equally popular misogyny" (ibid.: p. 616). This is why we have to think about the nature and values of these newly visible forms of feminism, and the ethics behind them, while also keeping in mind the ever-present misogynies. And it is here that a notion of postfeminism could prove itself useful, providing we understand it as "an object of critical feminist analysis" (Gill and Scharff, 2011: p. 4) and a critical analytical category, designed to capture empirical regularities in the world (Gill, 2016: p. 621).

As such, postfeminism is an object of analysis, not a position or a perspective (ibid.). It can be understood as a "set of dominant discourses that infuse and shape the zeitgeist of contemporary culture" (Ringrose, 2013: p. 5), rather than a continuation of feminism or a new version of it. If we define postfeminism in these terms rather than focusing on its teleological dimension, we can better understand and critically examine certain postfeminist trends embedded in the field of education. These position girls as the winners of globalisation and promote notions of female power and success (Ringrose, 2013). The "new sexual contract" (McRobbie, 2007) constructs girls as subjects of capacity. By entering the public sphere, women and girls become the object of government attention and concern, while being addressed as though they are already "gender aware", as a result of equal opportunities policies in the education system. With this presumed feminist influence behind them, they are expected to be independent and self-reliant (Budgeon, 2001; Harris, 2004, in McRobbie, 2007: pp. 722–723). These female individualisation processes entail constant self-monitoring and require that young women put themselves at the centre of attention (McRobbie, 2007: p. 723). Women are thus "intensively managed subject/s/ of post-feminist, gender-aware biopolitical practices of new governmentality" (Rose, 1999, in ibid.).

The postfeminist discourse about "girl power" (Ringrose, 2007) claims that girls now have the capacity to do, be and have anything they want – if only they invest enough personal effort (Pomerantz and Raby, 2011: p. 550). Successful girls are offered as convincing evidence that girls today are not limited by structural constraints and gender inequality

(Aapola et al., 2005; Harris, 2004, in ibid.). Postfeminist discourses are thus based on the idea that girls and women no longer need feminist politics (McRobbie, 2009) since gender oppressions have evaporated and gender equality is presumed to be achieved (Pomerantz and Raby, 2011).

It can thus appear that feminism has brought "its own movement to a standstill", to quote Iris van der Tuin (2015: p. xiv). It has, as Kavka (2002: p. 32) notes, "erased itself out of existence by its very success". These are precisely the reasons why we need feminism now more than ever, as society still functions on patriarchal principles even if it is trying to present itself as gender-neutral or, paradoxically, even as newly feminist, as has been the case of late. This discrepancy can be observed in the generations of young women who believe they are liberating themselves while engaging in what McRobbie (2007, 2009) refers to as a "post-feminist masquerade", a form of gender power securing the (re)production of masculine hegemony by means of ironic, quasi-feminist strategies of taking on highly-styled disguise of femininity. Paradoxically, though, the post-feminist masquerade emphasises its non-coercive status by presenting itself as a matter of personal choice (McRobbie, 2009).

Postfeminism operates on the principle of restructuring the relations and practices that were established as patriarchal in the Second Wave by ascribing to them positive, liberating meanings and carefully masking the social pressure and coercion tied to them. But simply rebranding certain practices as liberating does not make them essentially less oppressive. Feminism reminds us of just that, as van der Tuin (2015: p. 2) elaborates:

> Feminism is a working through of Difference as a structuring principle of empirical realities as well as the social imaginary so as to seek less pejorative relations of (sexual) differing. I do not foresee a stabilization of differing relations – it is in fact not in the nature of difference as an active verb to stabilize – and therefore I predict that feminism has a long future ahead of itself. Feminists working though Difference can only be helped by embracing the work of feminist foremothers. Feminists of the past have engaged with the same game.

The second step towards transtemporal interaction has to do with uncovering gendered relations in education and society as a whole, especially those veiled in sophisticated postfeminist discourses. This cannot be done without reflecting on the prominence of postfeminism. Why is postfeminism such a powerful modus operandi in contemporary society? The obvious answer would be the role of different agents of socialisation, such as schools, mass media and popular culture, which, of course, cannot be overlooked. We have already addressed some of these topics.

However, there might be another aspect to the problem, tied closely to the feminist movement itself. We have to ask ourselves about the possibility of the postfeminist climate being partly a consequence of the lack of understanding and cooperation among feminists from the past and present generations. The feminist foremothers are often forgotten and the important work of Second Wave feminism too hastily written off or regarded as redundant. Is there perhaps not enough "transgenerational continuity" (van der Tuin, 2015) within feminism? Gill (2016: p. 618), for example, highlights how different versions of feminism that are prominently featured in contemporary culture "make visible very specific 'generations' of feminists" and how the media promote the growth of generational discord about feminism. The specific versions of feminism that are gaining visibility in today's society seem to be postfeminist in nature and thus in complete discord with some of the core feminist values. Individuality is replacing solidarity and cooperation, and one could even make a case that the gaze of individuals has turned to the mirror and away from others. It is therefore easy to share van der Tuin's concern about the consequences of torn and broken ties to the past. At this point, it would be useful to employ the concept of transtemporal interaction.

Transtemporal interaction

Transtemporal interaction is recognition of the constant need to converse and consult with, to read and reflect upon the work of feminists from both past and present and even yet to come. It encompasses the notions of cooperation, generativity,[3] solidarity, conversations, interactions and interconnectedness. It is a concept we employ when we are thinking about feminist ethics and values. It can also help us with contextualising the commonalities and differences among particular schools of thought. Transtemporal interaction is a useful conceptual tool, allowing us to take feminist history into account, but not to be limited by its temporality. By employing transtemporal interaction, we refuse the evolutionary logic of viewing feminism as a teleological development of phases over time, and can review the relationship between feminism and postfeminism in ideological terms. We can fuel our knowledge about different generations and ask the important questions regarding the themes, ideas, perceptions and beliefs of feminism, but also those of postfeminism. By conversing with

3 The term "generativity" was coined by Erik Erikson, who defined it as a "concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (1950, in Slater, 2003: p. 57). Here, it is understood more broadly and not just as a one-way street. Generativity entails interactions with others in ways that contribute not just to the next generation, but to every participating generation.

fellow feminists and looking back at the complex tradition of the Second Wave, it becomes evident that the foundations of postfeminist ideology are problematic.

One example of this can be observed in the field of education, where gender-binary conceptions of educational achievement are "easily recuperated into individualizing neo-liberal discourses of educational equality, and consistently conceal how issues of achievement in school are related to issues of class, race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship and location" (Ringrose, 2007: p. 471). This sentiment goes against some of the core feminist ideas and goals, as discussed in the works of prominent authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who formulated and utilised the important – but nowadays unfortunately somewhat overused and often misinterpreted[4] – concept of intersectionality. The postfeminist climate creates concerns about virtually every aspect of educational experience and outcomes, focusing on issues of agency and choice, success, aggression, sexuality, and sexualisation in schools. None of these are subject to critical assessment, because postfeminism fails to take into account gendered relations of power, instead making judgements and creating moral panic.

By engaging in transtemporal interaction, we make sure to always keep in mind the important feminist legacy but also to constantly question it. In this sense it is not just a process of adopting, but rather a generative practice. If we lose touch with the feminist past, if we fail to cooperate with contemporary feminists and to engage in conversations with young feminists, we actively hurt the future of feminism. The result of transtemporal interaction is a complex conglomerate of various feminist reflections, mindful of core feminist ethics. But what exactly are these?

The goal of feminist ethics is to eliminate or at least alleviate the oppression of any group of people, but most particularly women (Jaggar, 1992). Emancipation and empowerment are thus desired outcomes. Breanne Fahs, for example, wrote that one of the most troubling and dangerous patterns is the cultural tendency to twist and corrupt empowerment discourses, making them become clichéd, commodified, detrimental and ultimately disempowering (2011, in Gill, 2016: pp. 623–624). Postfeminism does just that. It restructures the relations and practices established as patriarchal in the Second Wave by ascribing to them new,

4 For an insightful thematisation of the current use of the concept, see Sara Salem's (2016) text on intersectionality as travelling theory. Her thoughts on the subject are an excellent example of what transtemporal interaction as a generative practice entails – it is not simply about adopting a certain concept and using it without criticism, but rather truly understanding what our feminist foremothers had in mind and then building on it.

positive meanings and falsely positioning them as liberating to women. In this sense, postfeminism undermines feminist ethics.

Nonetheless, there is a potential to transform postfeminism to a notion that embraces the work of feminist foremothers and builds a strong foundation for the future of feminism, providing we understand it as a conceptual tool and use it accordingly. This process does not call for a redefinition of postfeminism and the end result most certainly is not a new, renamed version of the concept. It simply marks a different epistemological approach to the concept of postfeminism, defined by a critical reflection of gendered structural mechanisms of inequality it perpetuates. Transtemporal interaction seems particularly useful here, since it reminds us of precisely those core feminist values and ethics that have been forgotten in postfeminism. It can help us understand that patriarchy is sadly not a thing of our past, but rather very much the present state of our society. Focusing on the field of education specifically, transtemporal interaction can help us grasp how the dominant gendered educational discourse creates divides and isolates particular groups of students as the most marginalised as a means for competing for educational resources (see Ringrose, 2013). Transtemporal interaction utilises postfeminism as an analytical category, and such an outlook can serve as a gateway to thinking about the ways the future can be different.

One way this can be done is by establishing transgenerational continuity and actively engaging in the conversations about key feminist ethics. Yes, feminism is an umbrella term that incorporates different – indeed often opposing – schools of thought, as Becky Francis (2001: p. 162) argues. However, she goes on to say that "there remain unifying themes central to all feminist perspectives" (ibid.) and that these are the ones we need to keep in mind. Francis lists some of them: "a concern with gender; a perception of women as generally disadvantaged in gender relations (while often viewing men as requiring liberation too); a perception of this gender inequality as wrong; and consequently an aim to change things for the better" (ibid.). Kavka (2002: p. 33), meanwhile, argues that this inherent appeal to ethics is precisely the reason why feminism cannot have a linear history and should be understood as a name "for the pursuit of justice, unifying the multiple histories of particular struggles that sometimes overlap with and sometimes work against one another." In the context of transtemporal interaction, that is by keeping in mind the underlying ethics, common goals and values of cooperation, postfeminism can be reconceptualised to become a fusion of "different spaces and moments, history and futuricity of feminist engagements with education /.../ used to trouble our ideas about what feminism has been, is and can be in relation to

the sexual politics of education and schooling", as Ringrose (2013: p. 5) so aptly puts it.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to point out some of the inconsistencies that arise if we define feminism and postfeminism exclusively in temporal terms. This does not mean, however, that the idea of "transgenerational continuity" within feminism as van der Tuin (2015) conceptualises it is inconceivable in any way. On the contrary, it is essential precisely because it allows us to build upon the teleological understanding of feminist history. Feminist history can be utilised as a platform for creating a feminist future, defined primarily by feminist ethics and characterised by the diversity of conceptual meanings. Such a future is inconceivable without transgenerational continuity, which itself is not merely temporally defined. Indeed it encompasses the need to pose feminist questions, to search for answers, and to generate new ideas, fueled by the powerful feminist heritage.

Transtemporal interaction is a useful concept when examining the history of feminism because it allows us to reconceptualise it in a way that highlights the commonalities and differences in feminist ideas and reminds us of basic feminist ethics, values and goals. It shifts focus from temporality to substance, so that feminism can best be thought of as "multiple practices that share historical links to an umbrella term" (Kavka, 2002: p. 33). In this light, the "post" in postfeminism becomes an empty space, without a beginning or an end, telling us "not that feminism is over but that it is out of time" (ibid.). Its history becomes something that Kavka (ibid.) names an "ethical history", a utopian rather than a temporal history, "for feminism is and has been driven by the promise of the world becoming a different place."

By losing its temporal grounds, postfeminism gains the potential to generate new meanings, especially when applied as a critical analytical category. Focusing on the field of education, this allows us to critically examine and reflect upon the different gendered discourses positioning certain groups of students as successful and others as in desperate need of help, while ignoring the effect of structural inequalities on students' lived experiences in school. Furthermore, applying postfeminism as a critical analytical category unmasks the intricate ways in which, as Ringrose (2013: p. 139) says, certain presumptions of gender equality "obscure on-going issues of sexual difference and sexism" that girls and, indeed, all students experience in the classroom and beyond.

Utilising the "post" in postfeminism as a conceptual tool allows us to avoid creating a static bricolage in the form of a new feminist category. In this light, postfeminism is not just a scrapbook of random ideas broadly delineating a new version of feminism. In the process of transtemporal interaction, we can apply the idea of transgenerational cooperation to it, while grounding it in basic feminist values – those of justice, solidarity, interdisciplinarity and interconnectedness. By doing so, we engage in a generative practice, opening up the potential for redefining and reimagining social relations of power and seeing the world in a different light. And is this not exactly what feminism is all about?

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