
Teaching and Trending Feminism in the 21st Century

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Is feminism a new trend in popular culture? If so, is this a good or a bad thing? And, besides, what kind of feminism does this entail? Thus, to start, it is appropriate to identify some of the most prominent moments that have helped define “feminism” (understanding the term very generally here, hence the use of the quotation marks) as we know it today, to start exploring and exposing both the feminist and post-feminist characteristics, to think about the renegotiation between the two, and reflect on their influence on children and young adults. It is clear that quite specific images of womanhood/girlhood are being marketed through the media and that they are causing the repackaging of not only girlhood or womanhood but also of feminism itself (see e.g. Becker et al., 2016).¹

However, my aim is not to offer of a typology of contemporary “sub-forms” or “reformed” kinds of “feminism”: there are many of them and elaborating on them would be a somewhat tedious job or, at least, a complicated issue (so I will refrain from doing it) (see also Rottenberg, 2018, p. 166 ff). Let me just name a few of them: “choice feminism”, “power feminism”, “celebrity feminism”, “hashtag feminism”, “marketplace feminism” and others, even “lifestyle feminism”, “feminism lite” or “gateway feminism”.² No, one of my objectives is to point out that there is something awry with the dominant, media-regulated forms of “feminism”, which

1 This repackaging also “encourages girls to exchange political power for purchasing power” (Becker et al., 2016, p. 1218).

2 But wait, there is more, such as “tough cookie feminism” (which is Camille Paglia’s formulation, quoted in Moi, 2006, p. 1737). Still, all this is not to be confused with different contemporary strands of feminist theorizing such as e.g. feminist materialism, corporeal feminism, post-human feminism ... (see also Lykke, 2010, p. 131).

pass as the core of feminism down to generations of girls and young women. I am somewhat inclined to think that on closer inspection these forms of “feminism” are not really feminist and might, as stated by Toril Moi (2006, p. 1739),³ even further the conservative feminist-bashing agenda. However, this approach (containing my afore-mentioned doubts), according to Catharine Rottenberg, can also be problematic. For instance, it assumes that feminism has a stable essence or universal foundation (admittedly, that is not necessarily always so)⁴ and, as demonstrated several times in the history of feminism, “any attempt to define feminism once and for all or to police its borders, results in violent exclusions while often buttressing imperialist and racist projects” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 169). This was clearly elaborated in Chandra Mohanty’s work on the construction of non-Western women as “an ahistorical, monolithic, and coherent group or category” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 170).

Hence, according to Catharine Rottenberg, simply “dismissing neoliberal feminism as ‘faux feminism’ reproduces a similar logic of exclusion”:

And while it is clear that this kind of dismissal stems from a political desire to reclaim feminism for more progressive purposes, theoretically it seems misguided. Indeed, if, on the one hand, we have witnessed the increasing entanglement of feminism with a range of neoliberal and neo-conservative and even right-wing issues across the globe, on the other hand, this imbrication of feminism with non-emancipatory projects is a powerful reminder that feminism has always been an unstable signifier (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 170).

But still, one of the most important things to have in mind is: “the current shift to ‘feminism is wonderful’, in the mainstream media /.../ de-politicizes feminism, making it less of a radical movement that seeks social change and more a portrayal of individual empowerment on the part of exceptional women. In essence, it seeks to separate the personal from the political” (Caddell, 2015, p. ii). After years of general aversion to feminism (either its endeavours or the term itself, or both), this shift should of course be welcomed if it were not for its “rebranding” (and I apologise for this marketing expression) which “relies on disavowing the stereotype of the unattractive and sexless feminist” and/or on positioning “outside the stuffy and dry feminism associated with academia” (Rivers, 2017, p. 66). In this way, feminism has been co-opted and depoliticised

3 Let me point out that the article by Moi was issued in 2006 when feminism was indeed still the unspeakable F-word. Today (ab)uses of the word are far more common, albeit it remains to be seen to what extent the general cultural image of feminism has changed.

4 Although I would still opt for “universal foundation”.

and should no doubt be reclaimed as a transformative politics (Rivers, 2017).⁵ I could not agree more.

It might be too simplistic to suggest the interest in feminism can be attributed to the media-friendly image of “feminism” only. Yet, it is certainly true that the renewed popularity of feminism(s) has both influenced and been influenced by the commercialisation of the movement, as pointed out by Nicola Rivers (2017, p. 57). Feminism sells, or at least those strands of feminism uncomplicatedly promoting the neoliberal principles of agency, choice, and empowerment (*ibid.*). There is quite a noticeable shift towards the personal battles and independence of women; collective endeavours are swept aside and the principle of individualising social problems and obstacles (along the lines of “If you cannot, it is entirely your fault”) is put at the forefront (e.g. Vendramin, 2018, p. 77). The images of these independent and successful women are often taken for more than what they are. Structural limitations are made invisible and success is presented as individual attainment (one hardly has to mention that the possibility of success is clearly an option for already privileged middle-class women; for the disenfranchised, less so). The collective nature of oppression is nowhere to be seen, hence there is no need for organised action to remedy social injustice (Genz, 2006, p. 343).⁶ This narrative has re-introduced the syndrome of “the exceptional woman”, which was a recognised *topos* *before* the women’s movement introduced more egalitarian principles of inter-connection, solidarity and teamwork (Braidotti, 2005, p. 4).

It might thus be overlooked that this “feminism” rather appears a lot like celebrating or show-casing traditional forms of femininity. As Angela McRobbie points out, under the celebrations of women’s freedom, there is an insurgent tidal wave of patriarchalism, embedded within various forms of feminine popular culture (McRobbie, 2008, p. 539). Put slightly differently, feminist themes have been popularised and “mainstreamed”, but not only that, “they have also become increasingly compatible with neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic agendas” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 11). Catharine Rottenberg uses the term “neoliberal feminism” and claims it is “a key contemporary discourse that is overshadowing other forms of feminism” (*ibid.*, p. 21). This makes the vocabulary of social justice quite difficult to pursue (*ibid.*), “as this new and increasingly popular

5 On the other hand it is true, as Janell Hobson puts it, one should not be confined to accept complicated academic prose as the only legitimate discourse, critical issues should (also) be articulated for a wider audience and messages existing in music, films, and art have the potential “to complement, not replace, the feminist manifestoes, academic monographs, policy briefs, and grassroots missions /.../” (Hobson, 2017, p. 1000).

6 Stéphanie Genz speaks explicitly with post-feminism in mind.

form of feminism has been curiously and unsettlingly unmoored from those key terms of equality, justice, and emancipation that have informed women's movements and feminism since their inception" (ibid., p. 11).

Having said this, it is all the more important to strive for a historically nuanced image of feminism and women's fight for their rights. We need to be reminded once again that there are connections between gender-based oppression and the practices of searching for knowledge. This means that "the legitimization of knowledge claims is intimately tied to the networks of domination and exclusion" (Lennon & Whitford, 1994, p. 1). Further (I return to this at the end of this issue of *The School Field* or, in Slovenian, *Šolsko polje*): "This recognition has moved issues of epistemology from the world of somewhat esoteric philosophy to the centre-stage of contemporary culture" (ibid.).

Here education, more precisely school curricula⁷ (and, ideally, school practice), has an important role as curricula define the representations and definitions of feminism and the struggles for women's rights, which may then serve as a starting point for reflecting on everyday practices in schools and acting accordingly if they are found wanting from the equality perspective.⁸ I am writing this with Slovenian primary school curricula in mind as I am familiar with their gaps and omissions,⁹ which somehow replicate more and more with every new edition or renewal, but the point is of course more widely applicable as also demonstrated by several authors here.

But speaking about feminism and education entails two slightly different things, which should be explained here, at least in short, as more explanations and theoretisations are available later on in this issue of *The School Field*. First (this is not a value-laden order), there is education *about* feminism – and I have already mentioned the tendency to avoid the term, referring to primary school curricula mainly (see note 9), although the authors contributing here deal with it on the university (and alternative!) level as well. Second, there is education (*for*) feminism or teaching from

7 It might be worth repeating that the knowledge that makes it into the curriculum is the result of complex power relations, struggles and compromises among various social groups (Apple, 1992, p. 70).

8 This is first of all a policy issue, which should be – with documents, recommendations and the like – a "safety net" against the exclusions, silences and taken-for-granted ideas. Another document is a curriculum with precisely defined contents and emancipatory knowledge brought to the forefront, together with the provision of tools for analysis (Vendramin, 2014, p. 902).

9 For example, although the curricula for history and for civic education deal with themes such as sex/gender or emancipation, the term "feminism" is not mentioned at all (for a little more on this, see Vendramin, 2019).

a feminist standpoint (i.e. as a feminist).¹⁰ Ideally, the two are joined in a struggle towards social and personal transformation or, in a slightly different perspective,¹¹ what is needed is the convergence of theory and practice (Pravadelli in Perger et al., this issue).

Nina Perger, Metka Mencin and Veronika Tašner in their contribution *Teaching Feminism: Between Marginalisation and Feminist Persistence* deal with feminist principles, content and practices in higher education in times of neoliberal ideology, post-feminism and the intensification of extreme-right wing politics. They look into the state of feminist topics in the context of Slovenian higher education via document analysis of the curricula of Slovenian universities. Their research shows that gender-related topics are marginalised and non-obligatory, and feminist topics sporadic.

Biljana Kašić in her contribution *Feminism as Epistemic Disobedience and Transformative Knowledge: Exploration of an Alternative Educational Centre* argues that an alternative form of education (i.e. outside of academic institutions) can ensure a freeing up from hegemonic and misogynist knowledge; thus, it creates a powerful shift towards feminism as an epistemic disobedience and activist theory. She further elaborates on the need to add new contents and to embed a gender perspective across the curriculum.

Renata Šribar deals with current pandemic crisis and relates it to feminist practice (i.e. pandemic-related feminist pedagogy) in her *Study in a Virtual Class: Doings of Feminist Pedagogy and the Covid-19 Crisis*. Her article concerns personal experiences of teaching in a virtual class and reflects on the characteristics of feminist and critical pedagogy. She presents a conceptual reorganisation via the triangulation of students, the “object”, (subject matter, related experience, and embodiment through feelings), and the teacher.

Ana Mladenović also looks at feminist classrooms in her contribution *Feminist Classrooms in Practice* and highlights the importance of integrating feminist pedagogy throughout the entire education system. She presents examples of feminist classrooms on different education levels (preschool education, primary and secondary education). Not all of the practices are presented in the literature review; practices on primary and secondary levels are presented as reported in a semi-structured interview with a teacher in training.

10 This is not entirely the same as a standpoint as an epistemological concept, see e.g. Anderson, 2020.

11 I include not only theory in a narrower sense of the word, but also instruction from a historical perspective on the fights for women's rights etc.

Mirjana Adamović in her contribution *What Can We Learn About Feminism from Web Portals? – Analysing Media Bulletins* examines the “feminist” contents of the most visited Croatian web portals and analyses feminist activities, their connotations and hierarchal power relationships. Through analysis, she identifies five thematic frameworks: feminist pioneers, female politicians and feminism, celebrity feminism, feminist activism, and feminism and film. It is shown that young people cannot really obtain a realistic picture of feminism through web portals, and rarely, in a few occasional news items, can they obtain a quick education on feminist values, and that there is much decoupling of feminist values from feminism.

Mojca Šorli in her article *Feminism and Gender-Neutral Language: Between Systems and Effects* presents and reflects on gender-sensitive use of language through debates conducted in the last few years in Slovenia on the Slovenian language.¹² As shown, this use exceeds inclusivity in language; it must be supplemented with the awareness that choosing the masculine gender is not only a matter of grammatical rules, but androcentricity as a norm in society as a whole. Since language, as she puts it, is a key factor in the actualisation or deceleration of social equalities, what kind of messages are being sent to children, young adults?

Majda Hrženjak bases her contribution *Sporty Boys and Fashion Girls: Manoeuvring Between Dominant Norms of Gender Identity* on Lévi-Straussian formula “girls : boys = fashion : football”. The article analyses how teenagers deploy clothing practices and other techniques of body self-regulation to help them deal with social control and peer pressure. The main reflection relates to the processes of self-construction of masculine and feminine identity. In the end, she turns to the role of school in avoiding reinforcement of traditional gender dichotomy and supporting expressions of alternative ways of doing femininity and masculinity.

Finally, I as the editor in the article *The Grammar of Knowledge: A Look at Feminism and Feminist Epistemologies* turn to what might be another main theme of this issue of *The School Field* – i.e. feminist epistemology. Here, I start with Marianne Janack’s definition about the importance of “gender as an analytic category in discussions, criticisms, and reconstructions of epistemic practices, norms, and ideals” (Janack, n.d.). I emphasise the role, importance and uniting agent of feminist

12 My note for those not familiar with specifics of the Slovenian language (in short): unlike in English, in Slovenian, gender is not only visible in pronouns and nouns, but there needs to be gender-based agreement with adjectives and verbs as well. This feature often serves as an argument against the possibility of more gender-fair language.

epistemology (which, of course, goes not only for this issue, but for feminism and knowledge-production generally).

This special issue ends with two book reviews. First, Sabina Autor reviews Mary Beard's book *Women and Power*. The second review is by Nina Perger – she looks at Sara Ahmed's book *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*.

I hope that this issue of *The School Field* will be read and discussed, perhaps used in research and teaching. It may help open up even more new intellectual spaces of cooperation and reflection. And, of course, with any luck there will be several more to follow on similar topics.

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