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## **Top Girls? Young Women and the Sexual Contract**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a great honour to be asked to give this lecture tonight. My topic is the way in which young women are recently positioned in contemporary society as Top Girls, as though they have won rights and gained equality, as though feminism has done its work, and is now no longer needed as a political force. The media and the culture convey to the public that having done its work residual inequalities or special issues of concern such as the predicament of young Muslim girls, can now be dealt with by gender professionals, by men and women occupying key positions across the range of social and political institutions. If I was to draw a generalisation I would say that the current climate across the Western world, which considers the place of young women today, is rather self-congratulatory, as though to say 'haven't young women done well and haven't we all helped them on their way', such that we can claim that liberating women can be seen as a mark of western values.

One of the arguments in my book and for this evening is that the media, popular culture, and in general the public domain have played a key role in mobilising consent to the world of neo-liberal values. It is in this sphere that we can detect a kind of orchestration of power 'at the juncture of everyday life' as Butler puts it. This evening I am going to attempt to unpack this field and inspect the pathways of contemporary neo-liberalism as it looks to one sector of the population, young women, as a group with immense potential. The political project of neo-liberalism promotes deregulation, privatisation and the shrinking of the public sector and welfare state, while at the same time resurrects an ideal of the social according to the values of the market. It speaks loudly about choice and freedom, it despises the 'dependency culture' and it promotes self-reliance and individualisation through mobilising notions of human capital, as Foucault with great prescience understood and dissected in his lectures in the mid 1970s *The Birth of Biopower*. But the question I raise is how young women come to be the subjects of address by these new constellations of power? How does what used to be a feminist kind of political discourse come to be co-opted and absorbed by the neo-liberal project?

One answer to this question is that the sphere of women's issues and of 'gender equality' terms have until recently been almost exclusively associated with left of centre social democratic programmes. But from a human capital perspective and also in recognition of women's increasing visibility in the labour market, this earning power and economic potential, provide an unprecedented opportunity to borrow a vocabulary of 'gender justice' from the domain of social democracy and give it a new inflection, to re-interpret the idea of women's issues according to a vocabulary of

individualisation, meritocracy, aspiration and achievement. As Stuart Hall has argued in relation to the UK the neo-liberal pathway of Tony Blair, it required a strategic underpinning of social welfarist provision, in order to make the case for change and modernisation. I would propose that women's earning capacity and the fulfilling of women's aspirations for some degree of economic independence provided one persuasive strand which appeared to be acceptable to both sides of the divide, the modernisers and the social democrats. Throughout the Blair years the idea of the housewife, or the economically inactive woman began to fade into non-existence. Women were expected to work and across the boundaries of class and ethnicity they would be given some support to ensure that they could earn a living.

The media, popular culture and the public domain had a key role to play in this process of creating a neo-liberal culture which was attentive to and this appealing to women. For this reason the media plays a key role in my analysis!

Popular media and consumer culture have developed very sensitive scientific tools for addressing this sector of the population, and it is in this media-landscape that a vocabulary of hyper-individualisation is successfully realised. The neo-liberal promotion of young women and their visibility within these 'spaces of attention' often itself sets up a binary opposition which then defines how feminism enters or re-enters the field of debate. For example the feminist feels tempted to puncture the optimism and the success of the Top Girls by drawing attention to existing sexual inequalities. She refers to the pay gap, to sexual violence, to inequalities in parenting responsibilities; she may also refer to forced marriages in Muslim communities. For this reason you may expect me to occupy such a position which would involve showing how the gains are not so substantial, but I want to avoid this for two reasons, first we need to understand what has occurred so that it is possible for neo-liberalism to champion the cause of women and to lay claim to women's achievements. How have they managed this? And what is at stake in this neo-liberal-feminism? Can it be understood as a kind of 'gender regime' based on a new sexual contract? Second, to adopt the position of the conventional feminist countering this story of success means complying with a narrative of feminist progress, a matter of positing success against failure based on a calculation of outcomes. Such a 'logic of progress' is always contentious. It is complicit with a kind of liberal feminist audit model for analysing women's gains or achievements on a world-wide basis. It assumes a linearity, a temporality and an idea of measurable indicators. There is also always a limited position for the feminist in such a debate, she must be a bearer of bad tidings, what Sara Ahmed calls a 'killjoy' or what I have described as the old-fashioned feminist, whose values seem to belong in the past. This limited stereotypical position which the feminist is expected to occupy signals how successful dominant culture has been in making of feminism a thing of the past, a dreary pessimistic politics with which few

modern young women would wish to identify. Feminism is then something that constrains the individual efforts and the aspiration of young women who are somehow post-feminist. My attention then is with the logistics and strategies, the mechanisms and technologies developed to create a new terrain for young women, where a renewed feminist politics appears to be unnecessary because they are in effect well looked after by government. I see this as a post-feminist form of bio-politics, a style of governmentality of the female population which is predicated less on motherhood and on reproduction but on unleashing productive capacities. Feminism is regarded as having done its work it is even recognised as having been a force for good, but it is no longer relevant and thus belongs to the past where it exists in its decrepitude. The remainder of this lecture will refer in some detail to the mass media and popular culture. I approach these spheres for analysis with ideas of figuration and technologies. Figures come to be crystallised under a public spotlight, technologies are established which function or operate like machines for the production of meaning-fields.

### **COMPLEXIFICATION OF BACKLASH**

Faludi and other US feminists charted anti-feminism, the moral majority and US neo-conservatism from early 70s onwards to the present day, which would have women back in the home permitting however the exceptional or charismatic woman to triumph, Thatcher or Sarah Palin. Post-feminism marks a terrain where there is complexification of backlash, ie feminism is absorbed, it is taken into account. Its ideas can be put to good use by the capitalist machine, indeed feminism modernises, updates, criticises, and adds novelty and an egalitarian gloss. But as this happens and as the state too endorses this absorption, feminism itself is seen as an expended force, with no need for its renewal. This pushing away underpins its passing away. This process relies on quite autonomous media productions which feed into the double entanglement of absorption and repudiation. There are soft repudiations which use gentle irony and humour to mock the earnestness of old-fashioned feminism. This is most marked in BJ, she herself in the film has a kind of imaginary dialogue with feminism as she self-consciously wears her mini skirt and see through blouse to attract the attention of her boss to whom she is sexually attracted. The feminist is the voice in her head of the asexual head teacher ticking her off for her misdemeanours. Bridget's refusal of the feminist pathway is most marked in a comic scene where to get the job in TV she is forced under the directions of the 'sexist boss' to slide down a firefighters pole and have her bottom revealed for all to see. The joke is that she is not actually forced, she knows the feminist point about workplace sexism but she chooses to do as she is asked. In this context feminism is implicitly disapproving, puritan, and

a force which is incompatible with pleasure and enjoyment. This trope continues throughout the film to the extent that BJ is an exemplar of a generational post-feminism, for whom feminism has for sure allowed her to enter the workplace and to enjoy sexual freedom but it has also stopped her from having fun and from learning how to be a real woman who can fulfil herself through romance marriage and motherhood. So to some extent feminism is both loved and hated.

A harder repudiation of an imagined feminist past can be seen in the pro-pornography position where young women themselves took the initiative of wearing T shirts with provocative slogans such as (as Ros Gill pointed out) LSE Babes! Or Pay to Touch. What was significant here was not just that young women were implicitly referring to a version of feminism which somehow stopped them from being sexual or desiring subjects, but that they did so within a vocabulary which was easily available to them, within the domain of neo-liberal popular culture. They simply appropriated the word 'babe' (which feminists would have been horrified by) and they made jokes about the sex or porn industry with the words 'pay to touch'. Young women here seemed to be taking the side of the backlash against feminism where they nevertheless recognised themselves as its products and beneficiaries. What post-feminism allowed was a way of positioning oneself in this terrain through the availability of words such as freedom and choice.

### **TECHNOLOGIES OF YOUNG WOMANHOOD**

But how is this achieved? What have been the technologies deployed to introduce a new kind of subject position for young women, across the barriers of race ethnicity and class? I have borrowed some terms from Deleuze such as luminosities as a kind of diffuse power which spreads rays of light across the bodies of young women. Young women or AI girls come to be regarded under the spotlight a theatrical process which highlights their visibility and movement. This power works through many media channels repetitively, while it is also absorbed by governments as a light hearted post-feminist way of speaking about gender or sexuality. It was summed up during the Blair years with the women MPs described as Blair Babes. In my book I designate four technologies at play across the new gender assemblage which produces a kind of sexual contract for young women.

A. The prominence of the fashion and beauty complex culminates in the figuration of the post-feminist masquerade. There is an interesting divesting of power from patriarchy to hyper-feminised consumer culture; it acts on behalf of patriarchy but with a new self-regulating mechanism. Women no longer act to please men or even to attract men. The portal of authority is this sphere of feminine self-policing. Once

again against the spectre of the unfashionable feminist, who is like a disapproving mother, the young woman chooses to indulge her obsessions in body image in fashion and consumer culture. On the one hand this lifts the young women outside the remit of the male gaze, her fashionista obsessions explicitly disregard the field of male approval. On the other hand in the workplace, the over concern with feminine appearance, the way in which the girl reader of Grazia magazine is literally weighed down with accessories with jewellery with heels, with new dresses every week, with body treatments and especially with bags....and shoes....means that she herself undermines her occupational identity with the visible signs of so many other items which need her attention. She surrounds herself with objects which, even when she ironically refers to their presence as constraining and superficial in some way displays a signal of feminine weakness, vulnerability, and the need for approval, there is something girlish in the post-feminist masquerade which is reassuring to men. She has shown herself to be too slavishly observant of fashion rules to be a really confident woman. This is something of a throw back to an earlier time, as Riviere (1928) argues the woman in masquerade, she feigns being 'foolish and bewildered' as a way of not displeasing her male counterparts for whom she cannot be anything other than a threat in the workplace. In post-feminist times this is performed knowingly and with a sense of irony. But its final effect is to secure the place of the consumer culture as a source of authority and domination in the everyday lives of young women. This is a displacement for the position once occupied by patriarchy.

There are three other figurations which come into play alongside the post-feminist masquerade. **B.** The 'working girl'/woman has been a recipient of education and access to the labour market. She exemplifies success also through marriage and motherhood. This gives rise to difficulties in maintaining high achievement in work, and in a post-feminist move she ascribes to the work-life balance as an attempt at a practical solution. There is no prospect of a feminist politics of the household or of childcare once again being revived or gaining recognition. Individualisation requires she jostles and juggles. If she can afford it she spends some of her earnings on paid help. Instead of requesting of her husband that he plays an equal role she sub contracts out the housework. The sociologist Rosemary Compton refers to the social compromise for women. She reduces the commitment to work so as to fulfil the requirements of motherhood and as compensation she ensures that the bodily perfection required of the post feminist masquerade is pursued into motherhood.

**C.** The phallic girl is technology of hyper-sexualised femininity again informed by feminism but hostile to it. Here the young woman mimics the privileges in leisure and sexuality normally ascribed to men. She drinks in excess, and has sex when she pleases without seeking security or marriage or motherhood. As long as she is not poor or dependent on state benefits she is blame-free since in a post-feminist society

there no longer exists the sexual double standard. Her brazen enjoyment of sex can even be taken up by agencies as a sign that western freedoms have been realised even if in anti-social ways. Even a disgraceful woman can be more than a source of tabloid newspaper scandal and social comedy; she can be tolerated, sometimes admired. Her sexual freedoms intersect with the relaxation in laws of prostitution, sex entertainment and the mainstreaming of pornography. We have no time to spend examining this terrain in depth, but the phallic girl emblemises the changes which make pornography socially acceptable. In fact the commercial availability of various forms of soft pornography again both pitches itself against the spectre of the disapproving or condemning feminist and at the same time legitimates itself on the basis that the new pornography involves high levels of female participation and approval. Like so many other areas of contemporary life it is a matter of personal choice. The feminist is routinely expected to take a stance against pornography such that this is almost an institutional role for her left to play as an elderly policewoman.

These technologies are also extended beyond the west to the east and the developing world. **D.** The global girl marks out a space for the production of a new subject position which is also predicated on freedoms inflected so that they respect cultural differences. Consumer culture develops an image of young women through the various global editions of a range of magazines, Marie Claire and Elle in China, India Vogue etc. What is marked in these figurations is an orientalist 'eagerness to please' and a 'readiness to work'. As Spivak comments practices of 'gender training' are focused towards young women who come to occupy a 'space of attention' on the part of western governments whose concerns are about security, and also global capital looking to ensuring the right quality of off shore labour.

It is on the basis of these technologies that what we could term a new sexual contract comes to be made available to young women. It is requested that they come forward as subjects of agency and capacity. The attention paid, the opportunities provided come to operate as a substitute for feminism which has been cast into the past. Governmental and commercial forces intersect to produce a horizon of possibilities for young women now informed by, even shaped by, former feminist ideals. Sexuality, access to consumer culture and the gaining of qualifications and thus the capacity to work define the terms of the sexual contract while political participation is relegated to a marginal role. Such a contract in effect leaves the gender hierarchies that exist more or less intact, while women appear to have won a range of freedoms and entitlements which make the case for a renewed feminism irrelevant or unconvincing.

## **SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE**

Coined by Bourdieu the idea of symbolic violence in his book *Distinction* refers to the way in which forms of class antagonism and aggression are extended into the field of consumer culture, in matters of taste and distinction. This means that social structures and the perpetuation of class hierarchies are maintained and reproduced through the ways in which socially dominant groups closely protect their privilege by disparaging, shaming or denigrating their social inferiors. The possession of cultural capital accrues from class privilege, it is a matter of taste, of knowledge about dress, manners etiquette but also about the world of culture, the arts and fine things. This form of capital is an asset traded on the labour market as extra curricular activities on the CV. Bourdieu writing in the mid 1960s says that middle class or upper bourgeois women have a key role to transmitting this form of cultural capital to their children. At the same time they use this to ensure the docility or fear of their working class counterparts who do not know how to eat unusual food in top restaurants or who do not know how to dress. While this overt form of symbolic violence which bullied and intimidated working class people was during the social democratic years relegated to the margins of society, and was associated with discrimination, prejudice, and unacceptable snobbish and aggressive behaviour..(eg shaming people for their poor appearance, laughing at disadvantaged people etc) the years of post-feminist neo-liberal values saw its re-appearance, once again cloaked with irony as though to say but we don't really mean it. In the UK unlike in Germany prime time TV broadcasts lifestyle make over tv programmes which reach huge audiences across the barriers of class and ethnicity and their main audience is women. *What Not to Wear* and *Would Like to Meet* are not at all considered trash TV instead their address is the mobile working class woman who needs help if she is to improve her chances in the labour market. Her instructors are middle class young women who have this store of valuable cultural capital at the tips of their fingers. They scrutinise and shame the victims into submission, their bodies have got out of shape, they have let themselves go, they have no idea how to look attractive and businesslike. They must be grateful to their improvers and accept their criticism. Out of sight of their victims but visible to the audience the middle class improvers often mock or make jokes about the women. They use snobbish language, they poke fun at their everyday lives, they point to their poor shabby clothing. As you can see from the drift of this description I understand this kind of programming to do the work for the new neo-liberal order from a distance and within the realms of entertainment and relaxation. The 'girls' who instruct their social inferiors are unambiguously upper class and well spoken and confident. The teams of experts across these programmes often expect the victims to slip back into old habits once the team have finished their jobs. But my main concern is to point to the social acceptability of punitive and denigratory actions and behaviours by women

towards other women with no need in a post feminist age of any kind of solidarity across class lines, quite the opposite. From this brief sketch of an analysis we can see how this symbolic violence extends across the social fabric. Where in a feminist age the single mother was considered to be hard working and a respectable citizen, who for whatever reason found herself divorced, nowadays the single mother carries connotations of social failure, poverty and low class status. Middle class AI girls are fearful of such a destiny, even when their feminist-generation mothers might themselves single mothers. But now there is something shameful and unattractive because of having to live on a lower income, there is a renewed stigma. This also points to a new and unexpected level of cruelty across the culture. It also shows how the heterosexual matrix creates new horizons of inclusion and exclusion, respectability and marginality.

### **CONCLUSION: NEO-LIBERALISATION, GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF THE VEIL**

This strategy I have described entails the disaggregation of what in the past we would have thought of as feminist solidarity. Individualisation means looking after the self and within feminine popular culture this includes a return to old fashioned female competition, bitchiness, class contempt. More recent permutations emerge from the way in which the US government under the Bush regime began a process of claiming a protectionist and supportive role in regard to safeguarding women's interests and supporting women's rights or education, employment and various freedoms. Feminism in this context was instrumentalised as a means of isolating and stigmatising other cultures in particular Muslim culture as backward or even uncivilised. Recently gay rights have also been drawn into this terrain of neo-nationalism such that Muslim cultures become the focus for sustained attack and undermining for their failure to recognise sexual minorities. Jasbir Puar has recently written at length on this idea of 'homo-nationalism' in the US as has Joan Scott in her incisive analysis of the politics of the veil in France. In the case of France many of the arguments I make in regard to the UK Blair years also find expression but with a particular French nuance. Scott shows how the Sarkozy government endorse a form of women's liberation which expects women to be attractive to men on the street and to show their bodies, this is after all a mark of the nation's wellbeing and of sexual good health. If men have the right to enjoy the sight of women in the street then women also have to be able to participate and return the look. Hence women who are veiled refuse the intrinsic freedoms associated with French nationality. It is the duty of the French state to impart the values of secularism and so girls at school must leave the veil at home. You might ask how does this connect with the spreading values of neo-



liberalism and my abbreviated answer is that it asks women to take sides, it reduces the potential for a feminism which crosses the boundaries of race and ethnicity as well as class. It stirs up prejudice and it marks a return of the racial stereotype. It instrumentalises feminism as a tool of government, while at the same time reducing the scope and potential for an expanded democratic realm for women's participation and political involvement. However all is not lost. In the last few years there has emerged an animated debate emerging from works such as that by Jasbir Puar and by Judith Butler which dissect these innovatory strategies which use the figure of the woman to create and maintain new gender divides and to reduce the possibility of cultural diversity and living with difference, and developing a cosmopolitan feminism.