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Angela McRobbie on the Illusion of Equality for Women

David Edmonds: *Has equality between men and women been achieved? Many people argue that all the big battles to achieve equality, have already been fought and won. Some say that feminism has gone too far. The sociologist Angela McRobbie, of Goldsmith College, has analysed the backlash to feminism.*

Nigel Warburton: *Angela McRobbie welcome to Social Science Bites.*

Angela McRobbie: Hi.

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we're going to focus on is the illusion of equality for women. I wonder if you could begin by saying a little bit about your research on that topic?*

Angela McRobbie: Well in the last ten to fifteen years I became incredibly interested in the way in which there seem to have developed a kind of an illusion of equality. There was something very specific, something different from the previous period where it was quite easy as a feminist to point to areas where it was absolutely obvious that young women were discriminated against, and where there was obvious inequality. And what really prompted my attention was the way in which actually quite the opposite seemed to be the case. It almost appeared as though people genuinely thought that women, particularly young women, had somehow gained equality. And I wanted to interrogate that as a social scientist, because it felt very dubious.

Nigel Warburton: *So what we're talking about here is equality of access to jobs, equality of earning potential?*

Angela McRobbie: Well I would say really that what happened - let's say in Britain, in Western Europe and also in North America - from the mid-1980s onwards, is that indeed feminism did have an impact across society. The very hard work, and the many battles fought by women of my generation, did begin to reap some kind of rewards. There were many debates about negative images of women in the media, over-sexualised images, stereotypes and advertising, you know, the whole history of sociology and cultural studies and media studies - as soon as feminists began to become involved in these fields of study they were driven towards interrogating, decoding, analysing the field of media and representation. So it was quite clear that something had to change. And I think for feminists of my generation, somehow that work had a momentum. And it forced people in positions of power, editors of magazines, people in government to actually take some steps. The same thing then also happened, I would say, in specific fields such as education and also in law. So the whole range of key social institutions came to be challenged by feminism. And I think that lasted for a good decade, from the mid-80s to the mid-90s. Then I think something different happened.

Nigel Warburton: *Okay, that's very interesting. So what did happen in the 90s, and how did you set about researching it?*

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Angela McRobbie: I think from the mid-1990s there was a kind of backlash. Of course there had always been a backlash, there had always been forces of opposition to feminism. And something definitely shifted in the mid-1990s. And the term I used was, “complexification of backlash”, because it wasn’t simply as though there were feminists on one side of the fence still making the same arguments, and there were more and more people saying, “No women should be back in a home or just being mums” and so on. There was a decisive shift, and I used the term “complexification of backlash” because I think what happened was that the forces that were opposing gender equality, and opposing, if you like, the visibility of women in positions of power, many of them actually agreed that, at a kind of commonsense level, that feminism did have a role to play but that it had gone too far; or that it had backfired, and that it had been responsible for breaking up too many homes; or it had caused the rise in the divorce rate; or women were taking men’s jobs, and so there was a crisis of masculinity; or, most specifically, that the kind of what was called the, “feminisation of the curriculum in schools”, meant that boys were alienated from schooling, and so consequently feminism was ‘to blame’ for the underperformance of boys at school.

Nigel Warburton: *Now is this just your assessment from reading around, of speaking to people, or was there some kind of empirical research that your conclusions are based on?*

Angela McRobbie: It’s a good question to put to me, what kind of sociologist I am. When I was writing the book, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, what I was doing was constantly drawing on contemporary feminist empirical research. And I was kind of filtering it, re-reading it, or I was drawing from a whole field of 20 years of research, for example on feminism and gender in education. So in many ways I would say that the analysis I came up with was more concerned to develop some concepts that I could develop out of empirical work. I’m not really the kind of sociologist who takes part in surveys or questionnaires, or the kind of governmental research looking at girls aged 14 to 16 and eating disorders. You know, that’s not quite me. What I like to do is to take the results, or to take the reports, and then really look at them in close detail. I suppose really you could say that that reveals my preference, or my expertise, as a kind of textual analyst. You know, I like analysing texts, in many ways - my training originally was in English Literature primarily, and then a bit of sociology, and then cultural studies. And so I’m most competent at that kind of interpretative, or qualitative approach. And having said that, I also should say I’m not really an ethnographer. You know I have in my life done quite a lot of work, that could be seen as having an empirical basis. I did a study of the British fashion industry, and I’m currently working on young women fashion start-ups. But I would say my methodology is deeply humanistic. I like talking to people, and I like kind of doing unstructured interviews, and I like observing and immersing myself.

Nigel Warburton: *I’m interested to know what your conclusions have been about the fashion industry, because obviously that’s a popular focus for criticism in terms of the role models it presents to young women.*

Angela McRobbie: Oh absolutely. So I think there are two answers to the question about the role of the fashion industry. One of the arguments that I developed in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, was really very much about how in a post-feminist society the key way in which power works, is that it seems as though young women have become equal, and it seems as though they’ve become visible, and that they’ve occupied prominent positions, jobs and so

on. And it also seems as though that old kind of benchmark of what used to be called “patriarchy”, or “male domination” or “masculine domination” as Pierre Bourdieu would put it, seems to have kind of faded out of the picture. And what I argued in the book is that that threshold, or horizon of authority, has been replaced by the fashion and beauty complex. Now obviously Naomi Wolf said something similar many years ago, but I think what I do is to look at the fashion and beauty complex in more substantial, theoretical terms. My argument is drawn on Foucault and on the idea of governmentality. And how does every day governmentality work for young women? Through notions of governing the self: looking after the self, the self as a task. And I argue that consumer culture, and the fashion and beauty complex, together with consumer culture - they’re really inseparable, come to function as a kind of displaced substitute for old fashioned patriarchy. And in some ways that’s all the more effective, because nobody can say, “Well it’s the fault of men” or “There’s still patterns of male dominance”, because actually the young women seem to be choosing to impose this kind of structure of perfection, of body consciousness, of doing it for themselves.

Nigel Warburton: *Just to get this clear, are you saying that young women who have, are focusing on shaping their body and appearance and how they look to other people, are guilty of a kind of false consciousness? That they believe that this is their choice, but actually something else is pulling their strings?*

Angela McRobbie: No. I think the idea of false consciousness is completely mechanical, and one-dimensional, and also it’s based on the idea that, “Well if only they could see the light, and see the truth which feminists would give to them, then the problem would be solved.” It’s much more complicated than that. What I’m talking about is the way in which everyday forms of power are organised, and function to both create the illusion of equality and the idea of activity, and the idea of choice, and the idea of empowerment. This is a kind of multi-faceted, multi-stranded set of activities which become the ways in which young women become, as Judith Butler would put it, “Culturally intelligible.” So the presence of this fashion-beauty complex comes to be oddly obsessively about femininity, at a time when it seems as though there has been the chance for women to actually achieve a greater degree of equality. And what I see this kind of orchestrated, hyper-femininity doing, is absolutely limiting the possibilities that young women have to participate in political culture. And the argument I make is that we can trace this through practices of government. The everyday kinds of concepts and ideas, that particularly emerged in the UK from the mid-1990s, and then from the days of New Labour, where there was a great emphasis on, if you like, allowing young women to feel that they were, as I put it, subjects of capacity, the “can do girl” - you know, “You can do it, you’ll no longer be held back”. And what I argued was that we could trace the contours there of a kind of new sexual contract to young women. The sexual contract said to young women, “Do well at school and university, and then you are achieving a great deal. Gain access to employment, because there will no longer be obstacles. With your own wage, you have achieved already a degree of financial independence”. And this is very helpful to the national economy on a variety of ways, because it means first of all that from a feminist perspective it means that young women will no longer be absolutely dependent on a male breadwinner. Plus of course it’s good for the economy. And it’s good for the economy. Why? Because it gives young women a disposable income. Now I see that moment in time where there’s a meritocracy, achievement in education, and then access to employment. And then the idea of a disposable wage, which

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can be then spent on older items like *Grazia* magazine or *The Evening Standard* or the makeover programmes recommend. Plus then alongside that there is the ending of the sexual double standard which says to young women, "You know what? You can have an active sexuality with impunity, as long as you don't become a teenage mum". This is government policy, this is what I mean by governmentality. So there was a kind of 'no blame' ethos in sexuality, "Go out, have fun, have as many partners as you like but don't, please don't get pregnant outside marriage and partnership". And this is all good for the economy, because with this disposable income you can buy shoes, you can keep the fashion chains in business, whether it's Primark or Uniqlo or whatever. So that all together I argued comprised a kind of sexual contract. And the underpinning was locking of young women into a kind of prison of activity, without that entailing a real political, an involvement. Young women were not being invited into formal politics. This process of governmentality was absolutely not saying, "Get involved in community politics, certainly not get involved in feminism, get involved in childcare debates, get involved in industrial debates about equal pay, which is still, of course, by the way, not equal pay at all. So there was a kind of cutting off point that government was saying, "You know what? We'll look after you". And who is we? Well "we" is pretty much the same old male hierarchy with a few odd women.

Nigel Warburton: *Often in that sort of situation where there is oppression, there's a reaction. There's a kind of avant garde or subculture that comes out with a different vision.*

Angela McRobbie: A very good question, did people just give into this new regime where it seemed as though feminism was no longer needed, and that government was sort of somehow looking after women? When I say "complexification of backlash" I think in popular culture, in popular media, there was also subliminal hostility to feminism. Feminism came to be kind of despised, joked, ridiculed. The last thing girls were encouraged to do was to be identified with feminism, and what I argued was that to be culturally intelligible as a girl at that point in time meant saying, "Oh I don't like feminism, I'm not a feminist. I'm up for it. I'm happy to go to strip clubs with my boyfriend. I'm fine with lap dancing bars. I can prove my equality virtually on the basis of not needing feminism" - indeed despising it. I often think that Tarantino was to blame, really, with his clever post-modern, multiple referenced, "It's a joke, no harm intended". But a whole bunch of comedians then locked into what was actually a kind of clever and complex new form of misogyny. I also began to recognise that there was a kind of fearfulness on the part of a younger generation of women. They somehow feared male disapproval: it was as though the idea of sexual politics itself had got lost. And that then induced this kind of timidity or fearfulness, on the part of young women. It certainly wasn't my book alone, but I think me saying it in a theoretical kind of way, using Judith Butler, using Foucault, and other things were happening at the same time, but I do think that gradually there were kind of voices of anger again. In some ways I think that one of the reasons there seem to be less contestation than there might have been, is that Queer Theory and Queer Politics soaked up quite a lot of that energy, which is all very good, fantastic, but I actually wanted to see it to be something that was crossing the boundaries of sexual identity as well.

Nigel Warburton: *Isn't one of the issues that there isn't just one feminism, there are many feminisms, so that there are arguments within feminism which are quite often quite angry*

and difficult arguments. So to say there's a feminist position on any particular topic is open to contestation itself?

Angela McRobbie: Oh absolutely, but I think it's a kind of media cliché to, anyway, imagine that ever was one feminism. I would say in the US by and large liberal feminism really did have a very profound impact. In the UK it was actually socialist feminism. For me the more types of feminism that exist the better, that doesn't mean to say I'm going to agree with many of them. But I think really the question now is not so much, "Is there one feminism or many feminisms?" but, actually "What in the world of globalisation, hegemonic, neoliberalism, what kind of feminism can there be?" It's difficult to see anything like a united women's movement, but what I'm impressed by is the way in which ... it's almost as though feminism recognises itself to be fragmented, dispersed, contradictory and defined in terms of difference. And so I quite like the way in which Pussy Riot have their kind of activities in Russia, and I like the way in which there were Muff Marchers against cosmetic surgery in London. I, kind of, quite like the idea of event politics, you know, the kind of dramatisation of gender issues. I think that's quite an effective strategy.

Nigel Warburton: *One thing I've noticed in interviewing a range of social scientists, is how often they've drawn on several disciplines. It's not as if they're simply sociologists, or theorists, or sometimes they're scientists. Sometimes they're, they're more literary in their approach. And there's a whole range of sources for what they do. Now that's obviously apparent in your work, do you find that you ever get criticised for not being easy to categorise?*

Angela McRobbie: My answer to that question would be really one of kind of age and longevity in that, you know, I've kind of been doing this for such a long time. I'm kind of drawn to the world of culture, you know, I think I'm a sociologist of culture. The people who influence me most in my writing, tend to be people like Pierre Bourdieu, obviously Foucault, who was a historian and a philosopher and so on, and Judith Butler. My kind of inclination is to work more with cultural forums, and to be able to develop political arguments based on those, reading those cultural forums, rather than to embark on huge, big EU funded projects that involve monitoring interviews carried out in ... you know I mean I just think, "Oh my God". I just, it's just not me really.

Nigel Warburton: *Many social scientists think that their work should influence policy. Do you think the kind of work that you do is of that kind? I mean you've talked about the importance of protest, and standing up for what you believe. But do you think you should influence actual political policy?*

Angela McRobbie: Well I think that's a really good question. There have been several occasions where I have been invited into breakfast Cabinet for body image summit. Or I think there was one moment during the Blair period where Patricia Hewitt decided that feminism did have some kind of existence, and she invited 10 of us round her table in the DTI. So you know it's not as though I'm so far removed from policy. And I think in relation to looking at the fashion industry, looking at fashion start-ups, looking at young women's employment I'm more than happy to take part in discussion and debate. But I think there's a kind of question mark. And it's a theoretical question as well, about where does one invest one's ideas? And how do the kind of ideas that you develop in sociology find an audience?

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And find a receptive audience? I mean I think I would have worked in public policy, if I had really wanted to be somebody that was shaping legislation. That would have been great to do that, but I think also quite frustrating as well, and easy to feel disappointed, so I prefer to be slightly kind of further back.

Nigel Warburton: *Angela McRobbie, thank you very much.*

Angela McRobbie: Thank you.

[ends]

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