

Feminism and Feminists in the Public Sphere: a Case of U.K. Interventions
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In conjunction with Jane Elliott (from the University of York), we have begun planning work for an academically-based **Feminist Commentary Collective** whose aim is to broaden the number and profile of feminist commentators appearing in popular media and put to use the high quality feminist research currently being produced within the academy to rejuvenate feminist-inflected popular discourse. This initiative is based on our shared sense of dismay that after 40 years of feminist activism, the vast majority of invocations of feminism and descriptions of feminist actions in the mainstream UK media are tokenistic, caricatural in nature, intellectually misinformed and pejorative.

Summarizing the place of feminism at this early 21st century moment led us to devise the opening statement for this panel:

“There has never been a greater need for informed feminist commentary than in the current cultural climate. While feminism is glancingly and regularly invoked as a straw (wo)man in popular culture, this is most often simply to rebut a feminist view before moving on to something else. When popular culture does engage with feminism directly, it frequently does so by sidelining it into “women’s issues” that are seen as peripheral to general questions of politics, economy and culture.”

Do the *Guardian's Observer Woman's* features on a columnist who grows out her leg hair for the first time in 23 years (gasp!) or the life and death question of how old is too old for hot pants constitute feminism for real women? From this benign extreme, we've detected another end of to a continuum: suspiciously hostile or blatantly self-promotional commentary on feminism packaged as serious feminist political writing. The result is a media landscape marked by a rote and predictable series of faux gender controversies, spectacles and scandals. Trends in cultural production and news reporting disguise racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism as sporadic, rather than as historically-rooted misogyny. Equally conspicuous is the emergence of a number of high-profile female anti-feminists such as Kate O'Beirne (*Women Who Make the World Worse*) and Kathleen Parker (*Save the Males*) whose polemics are often left unchallenged.

If we can agree that there is, indeed, a problem of feminist voice and representation trans-Atlantically, what are possible solutions? One that we propose is a series of unapologetically intellectual responses to a popular climate that makes regular recourse to anti-intellectualism and gender stereotypes while dismissing any gender-based critique as mere political correctness. Feminist blogs in the U.S. are doing this in greater number than we see happening in the United Kingdom. They constitute an important site for feminist academics as well since they provide a flexible format to allow for rapid yet in-depth responses and a means of generating feminist communiqués in response to prevailing incidents and episodes. Such means can draw attention to gaps and omissions in representations and reporting agendas that shape the current conception of feminist politics.

One question we raise is whether this state of affairs describes feminism's presence in the U.S. media and popular culture as well? The need for a supple, informed and politically-engaged feminism would seem to be nowhere better illustrated than in the crass vice presidential candidacy of Sarah Palin. However, feminist academics should not limit their interventions only to such clearly-connected cases as that of Governor Palin but to a whole range of contemporary concerns. For instance, what role might feminism play in analyzing the social/cultural roots of the global financial crisis?

We insist that a vibrant feminism assesses not only gender roles in their own right but also their relatedness to a whole spectrum of identity attributes including other crucial categories, such as race, class, sexuality, embodiment, citizenship and consumerism. We believe in the legitimacy and value of academic research to enrich and transform discussions in the public sphere. This concept of the public intellectual or scholar-activist is certainly not new but it does seem to be an under-utilized position in the U.K. context. In the meantime, the popular media continues to dumb down and distort feminism. We believe that popular audiences will be open to more complex and subtle approaches to gender politics if given access to them.

It is striking how frequently feminist viewpoints in the mass media are expressed by a small cohort of regularly used, recognizable feminist 'personalities' or configured as a catfight between competing feminist generations. We favour a feminist public pedagogy that acts on Henry Giroux's calls for academics to meaningfully challenge neoliberalism. Such an approach will serve a broader underlying goal of enhancing the egalitarianism of mass media representation, which purports to speak for a broadly conceived public but instead tends to reflect and reproduce the views of a narrow elite. By opening up new topics and introducing new speakers into the conversation, we hope to disrupt the reductive notion of warring feminist generations while fostering the next generation of feminist scholars.