

Paper proposal for Feminist Research Methods Conference – An International Conference,
Stockholm, February 2009.

Name: Jonathan Dean

Affiliation: Gender Institute, London School of Economics

Contact email: j.m.dean@lse.ac.uk

Paper Title:

‘Researching the Intersections of Feminist Politics and Popular Culture’

My paper contains some brief reflections on theoretical and methodological aspects of the relationship between feminist politics and popular culture. Much recent feminist scholarship has focussed on the construction of gender relations within a wide variety of “popular” cultural forms, to the extent that the popular cultural realm is something of a privileged site when feminists seek to make sense of contemporary gender relations. Furthermore, much of the vitality of feminist politics has arisen from its “politicisation” of a range of cultural forms previously regarded as outside the scope of the political. Despite this, there remain a series of ambiguities concerning the relation between feminist politics and popular culture, concerning questions such as how, when and where to feminist politics and “popular culture” intersect? And what does it mean for feminists to “politicize” a popular cultural entity or discourse?

These difficulties partly arise from a curious lack of research on feminist political practices around popular culture, as well as an insufficiently differentiated understanding of “politics” or “politicization” within feminist cultural studies. For instance, contemporary feminist analyses of popular culture tend to reproduce rather clumsy narratives about the recent history of the feminism/popular culture relation, for example through equating “second wave” feminism with an “outsider” stance, and “third wave” or contemporary feminism with an “insider” strategy (Hollows and Moseley, 2005: 2; Genz, 2006). Furthermore, feminist accounts of popular culture and media tend to fixate on a number of privileged entities, usually drawn from fictional visual texts, such that specific avatars of modern femininity, e.g. Bridget Jones, Ally McBeal, and Carrie Bradshaw are almost fetishised in their capacity of embodiments of contemporary discourses of feminism and femininity (see, especially, McRobbie, 2004, 2007; Hermes, 2005).

I thus want to argue that there is something of a gulf in feminist research which the theoretical and methodological arguments advanced here might help fill. On the one hand, there is a considerable body of work on feminist political action geared towards effecting specific policy outcomes (Kantola, 2006; Outshorn and Kantola, 2007; Lovenduski, 2005), and, on the other, as noted above, there is considerable work focussed upon textual readings and audience-based analysis of primarily visual popular cultural productions. My worry is that this paints an overly simple picture of the relationship between feminism and mainstream culture and media. We presently lack accounts of the complex ways in which feminist political action across the generations has been concerned with a variety of forms of critique, appropriation and evaluation of a range of mainstream and marginal cultural productions. Thus, formulating a more rigorous conception of the “political” within feminist cultural studies is essential if we are to be alert to the nuance and complexity of recent feminist political history.

One possible way of going about this might be to turn to the discipline of cultural studies. However, (neo) Gramscian cultural studies – following the polarising debate between the cultural pessimists and cultural optimists (Frith, 2006 [1991]; Webster, 2006 [1991]) – has failed to adequately grasp what it means for a cultural practice to be “political.” Elsewhere, a number of authors have drawn upon a Deleuzian lexicon of flows, assemblages and deterritorialisation to theorise the intersections of politics and popular culture (Patton, 2005; Simons, 2005; Braidotti, 1994, 2002). However, such approaches are blighted by a number of recurrent problems. These include: a curious preoccupation with the destabilisation of the subject as an end in itself, without interrogating what might follow politically from that destabilisation (Newman, 2007: 79); an excessive privileging of minoritarian and ‘micro’ practices at the expense of more general, ‘macro’ or ‘majoritarian’ politics, and, perhaps most importantly, a disregard for the role of representation and articulation in the construction of political claims (Laclau, 2005).

Other recent work still tends to operate with spatial metaphors, treating “politics” and “popular culture” as two separate topographical domains, which sometimes overlap (e.g. Street, 1997). Such approaches suffer from the weakness that, in delineating a specific topographical domain for politics, it risks domesticating the vitality and dynamism that has characterised feminist political interventions. Works by Watson (2006), Dean (2000) and Gill (2007) move in the direction of a more nuanced analysis, but neither offers a rigorous account of the politics/popular culture relation that could be used for empirical research.

I propose that, rather than invoking “politics” and “popular culture” as topographical domains that overlap, I highlight the usefulness of certain recent developments in political theory that represent politics as a *practice* relating to the constitution and contestation of social relations (Zerilli, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). This provides a more solid theoretical basis from which to interrogate whether any particular cultural practice can be characterised as “political,” without thereby confining politics to any specific domain, but also without claiming that “everything” is political. From this perspective, politics consists of the construction of relationships between things which have no intrinsic or necessary link. Political relations are thus ‘external to their terms: they are not given in objects themselves, but are a creation’ (Zerilli, 2005: 23). Politics thus necessarily has an imaginative element, ‘the ability to see or to forge new connections’ (*ibid*: 162). Thus, I want to argue that the political quality of something is given in the process of imaginatively constructing new ways of seeing the world, rather than being given in the objects themselves. Consider, for example, the second-wave feminist ‘politicisation’ of housework. One could say that housework was in some way always already political, in that it was grounded in a gendered power differential. Alternatively, one could say that housework was “politicised” through – as Zerilli says above – the creative linking together of elements that have no necessary relation.

I want to firmly side with the latter perspective. The former would require one of two moves. On the one hand, one could extend the argument to say that “everything is political,” a move which either leads to a naively celebratory cultural populism, or robs politics of any of its specificity (Dean, 2006; Fraser, 1989: 76). On the other hand, one could draw a division between things that are political in some fundamental sense, and things that ontologically resistant to politicisation. However, this would be a curious move to make from a feminist perspective: it would utterly curtail the inventive and imaginative dimensions which have been so important to feminist politics, and would risk imposing limits on the types of issues that could be brought into a feminist politicisation.

Consequently, perhaps the best way of framing the popular cultural realm (or, rather, realms: it is nonsensical to present it as a singular entity) is to see it as a resource to be utilised in the context of creative political practices: it is thus neither positively brimming with political possibilities, but nor is it irredeemably apolitical. Given the empirical impossibility of hearing all possible perspectives within a political exchange, specific cultural forms can thus help us to see things differently, to imagine new relations between objects. In *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Zerilli discusses imagination in relation to intersexuality (Zerilli, 2005a: 59-62): think, therefore of the transformative possibilities of Jeffrey Eugenides novel *Middlesex*, or the recent Argentinian film *XXY*, which offer new ways of seeing and understanding intersexuality in a much more powerful fashion than any knowledge claim or piece of empirical evidence.

But how might this rather tentative reformulation of the politics/popular culture distinction impact upon how we go about empirical research on feminist politics?

In terms of empirical research, the operationalisation of “politics” and “politicisation” used above necessitates close, detailed analysis of specific cases, as is thus runs counter to the tendency identified above to draw rather general conclusions about the general state of feminism/feminist politics from specific textual readings. It is thus alert to the ambiguous and often contradictory nature of feminist politics, whereby a given practice and discourse may have both political and depoliticising dimensions.

Let me render these claims a little more substantial by providing some brief notes on some of my own empirical research on feminist politics and popular culture. In 2004–2008, I carried out an in-depth case study of the F-word, arguably the UK’s leading feminist webzine (www.thefword.org.uk), looking at the different political practices and understandings of feminism used and described on the site. The F-word functions – within a British context – as a hub for the exchange of ideas and information relating to feminist activism. Its main focus is to provide a virtual communal space for young feminists to articulate their different perspectives on feminist cultural politics. It consists of feature articles which address a wide variety of issues relevant to contemporary feminists, as well as a blog (which is updated regularly), reviews of books/films etc, a comments section, and an extensive list of links to other feminist resources on the internet. It is specifically aimed at young women and girls, although it does welcome contributions from men as well. In addition, it specifically emphasises that it particularly welcomes discussion and contributions related to feminist analyses of popular culture.

I engaged with the F-word in a bit to situate it more broadly within the context of UK feminist politics, looking at how this might problematise dominant narratives about the state of feminist politics in the UK and elsewhere. To do this, I carried out an exhaustive archival analysis of material posted on the site, as well as semi-structured interviews with participants carried out through email exchanges, and a “virtual ethnography” via participation on its affiliated yahoo discussion group. I also wrote an article for the site describing my research interests and some tentative findings, and asked for feedback/comments via email.

In terms of the analytical theoretical perspective used, I used a “logics”-based approach, drawn from recent developments in post-marxist discourse theory (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The notion of a ‘logic’ is an analytical device to group together sets of discursive practices in a manner that establishes continuities across contexts, but which avoids the subsumptive and reductive tendencies of mainstream political science, and some feminist

cultural studies. As David Howarth points out, 'at a most abstract level, a logic refers, first, to the rules governing a practice, institution or system of relations between objects and, secondly, to the kinds of entities (and their relations) presupposed by the operation of such rules' (Howarth, 2005: 323). Thus, to name a logic – such as, for instance, the logic of the market, the logic of apartheid, entails a process of grouping together heterogeneous sets of discursive totalities such that we can gain a fuller awareness of continuities across contexts. To use the parlance of 'logics' does not imply a rigid consistency, but implies a loose level of continuity which is always subject to varying degrees of continuity and change. From such a perspective, an engagement with the subjective self-understandings of relevant actors is necessary but not be sufficient. What is also necessary is an attempt to situate actors' accounts of themselves within broader logics which may not be immediately apparent to the actors themselves (Glynos and Howrth, 2007: 21-22).

These provided useful theoretical and methodological tools for a close analysis of the contradictory and overlapping "logics" prevalent on the F-word website. Let me briefly outline some of the contradictory "logics" at work on the F-word and their relation to feminist politics. Note that, these are simply examples taken from my research and do not constitute a summary of the case study.

It was found that, in some instances, the F-word played host to a range of discourses complicit with an apolitical, individualised conception of feminism. Indeed, there is sense of playfulness and flippancy pervading much of the material on the F-word. At times, this can play into is a tendency for the type of feminism on the F-word to become complicit with discourses of competitive individualism, whereby feminism seems tied to notions of individual determination, self-management, and empowerment. Much of the site's content is imbued with individual assertions of an individualistic "power feminist" type, with only a latently critical relation to discourses of normative femininity and capitalist consumption. Indeed, the sense of there being simply an individualistic agenda is reinforced by the way in which, in practice, the F-word often takes the form of a series of individual monologues with relatively little critical exchange. To some extent then, the F-word was found to be criss-crossed by logics of apolitical quasi-feminist individualism, potentially lending weight to narratives of feminist depoliticisation and deradicalisation.

However, in opposition to this, the practices found on the F-word provide some glimpses into the fruitfulness of the popular cultural terrain for more overtly political modes of engagement with feminism. For one, the F-word has a seemingly strong interpellative capacity, such that it is able to bring young women into a feminist agenda, or is able to re-ignite and re-engage a residual identification with feminism which may perhaps have been buried or forgotten. In this sense, its capacity to instil not only a feminist identification, but a bold, determined and vigorous identification with feminism jars with the flippant individualism referred to above.

In this sense, one could argue that the political valence of the sorts of feminist cultural politics one finds on the F-word inheres in its capacity to foster strong affective investments in feminism. A generous, though not altogether inaccurate, reading of the F-word would be to claim that under conditions of intense individualisation, the construction of communal quasi-political spaces for young women becomes ever more important. Angela McRobbie argues that under present conditions, young women are 'three times over subjects of melancholic self-beratement' (McRobbie, 2007) through a combination of the loss of the same-sex love object, the process of oedipalisation, and the loss of the ideal of feminism. Implicit in McRobbie's current work is that a key political task for young women is the

development of practices that provide outlets for a return to female communality, and what she calls a ‘detachment from the [melancholic] self-berating ego’ (*ibid*). She argues that ‘the cultural practices of subculture and group rather than self, can be said to have offered this possibility to young people.... [and] it is possible to read activities like riotgrrrl, the website the f word... and organisations like ladyfest in exactly these terms’ (*ibid*). There remain serious ambiguities in McRobbie’s account: some of her psychoanalytic terminology sounds excessively reductive (for instance, what conception of oedipalisation is operative here?). However, these reservations aside, her account of post-feminist individualisation (McRobbie, 2009) sheds important light on the role that autonomous subcultural practices such as the F-word might play under present conditions. From this perspective, the political valence of the F-word could be seen to inhere in the way it provides a space for female communality that provides refuge from, and resistance to, the logics of post-feminist individualisation.

Consequently, one can argue that – in addition and in opposition to its more individualised, apolitical strand – there are also more politicised logics of feminist communality prevalent on the F-word. Contributors and participants persistently reiterated how discovery of, and involvement in, the F-word, ignited and/or reaffirmed an affective identification with a virtual feminist community. Furthermore, it should be noted that several contributors mentioned – both to me and within the contexts of discussions on the site – that the feminist analyses of specific mainstream cultural productions were particularly crucial in enabling and provoking a identification with the F-word’s virtual feminist community. Clearly these are fairly tentative notes, but they hopefully provide some indication of how we might more rigorously theorise and research feminist political practices around the popular cultural realm.

Bibliography

- Braidotti, Rosi. 1994. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2006. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dean, Jodi. 2000. ‘Introduction: the interface of political theory and cultural studies,’ in Dean, Jodi (eds). *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Dean, Jodi. 2006. ‘Political Theory and Cultural Studies,’ in Dryzek, John; Honig, Bonnie and Phillips, Anne (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*. Oxford; Oxford University Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1989. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Frith, Simon. 2006 [1991]. ‘The Good, the Bad and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture from the Populists,’ in Storey, John (ed). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Genz, Stephanie. 2006. ‘Third Way/ve: the politics of postfeminism.’ *Feminist Theory*, vol 7(3): 333-353.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2007. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glynos, Jason and Howarth, David. 2007. *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hermes, Joke. 2006. ‘“Ally McBeal,” ‘Sex and the City’ and The Tragic Success of Feminism,’ in Hollows, Joanne and Moseley, Rachel (eds.). *Feminism in Popular Culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Hollows, Joanne and Moseley, Rachel (2006). ‘Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism,’ in Hollows, Joanne and Moseley, Rachel (eds.). *Feminism in Popular Culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Kantola, Johanna. 2006. *Feminists Theorize the State*. Basingstoke: MacMillan.
- Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Lovenduski, 2005. ‘Introduction: State Feminism and the Political Representation of Women, in Lovenduski (eds). 2005. *State Feminism and Political Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- McRobbie, Angela. 2004. ‘Post-Feminism and Popular Culture.’ *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (3): 255-264.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2007. ‘Illegible Rage: Young Women’s Post-Feminist Disorders.’ http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/LSEPublicLecturesAndEvents/pdf/20070125_McRobbie.pdf. Accessed 16/03/07.

- McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, Social Change*. London: Sage.
- Newman, Saul. 2007. *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Outshoorn, Joyce and Kontola, Johanna. 2007. 'Changing State Feminism,' in Outshoorn and Kantola (eds). *Changing State Feminism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Patton, Paul. 2005. 'Deleuze and Democratic Politics,' in Thomassen, Lasse and Tønder, Lars (eds.). *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Simons, Jon. 2005. 'The Radical Democratic Possibilities of Popular Culture,' in Thomassen, Lasse and Tønder, Lars (eds.). *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Street, John. 1997. *Politics and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Watson, Sophie. 2006. *City Publics*. London: Routledge.
- Webster, Duncan. 2006 [1990]. 'Pessimism, Optimism, Pleasure: the Future of Cultural Studies,' in Storey, John (ed). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Zerilli, Linda. 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.