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Gender, Power and Left Politics: From Feminisation to “Feministisation”

Abstract

Responding to on-going debates about the presence (or otherwise) of feminism within left-wing politics, this article has two central aims. First, it seeks to develop a set of analytical criteria to identify and assess the extent to which an instance of politics has become “feminist”. Second, it aims to illustrate the potential utility of this framework by applying it to a range of examples of contemporary left politics in Britain. Our overall argument is similarly two-fold. Conceptually, learning from the literature on socialist feminism, gender and politics, and cultural studies and sociology, we identify five features of what we call “feministisation”, arguing that in addition to feminist ideas, policies and modes of organising, we must also pay attention to the role of embodied performances and affect. Empirically, we suggest that, seen through this lens, the British left has in fact undergone a significant, but uneven process of feministisation in recent years.

Keywords: feminism; left politics; Marxism; socialism; affect; performance

“Ah I would now, yes, .., with a certain ... two-faced ah shuffling of feet, ... I think most socialists of my generation, male socialists of my generation, would ... somewhat embarrassedly say the same thing ... you know? I think along the way, we’ve learnt a lot I think” (interview with male socialist activist when asked if he self-described as a feminist, 4/14/15).

A crucial vote is taken on a resolution that seeks to ensure a 50% quota of women on all representative bodies of the new party Left Unity. It passes with a large majority. When the result is announced, a man sitting in the audience laments rather loudly: ‘whatever happened to class politics?’ Upon hearing him, a furious young woman stands up and reprimands him in front of everyone, yelling: ‘I’m a woman, and I’m working class, how about that?!’ Enthusiastic applause erupts (excerpt from field notes taken at the founding conference of Left Unity, December 2013).

The first speaker at a panel entitled “We should all be feminists” is an activist from Feminist Fightback. She nervously addresses her audience. She describes her collective’s feminism as “anti-capitalist”, “intersectional” and “socialist”. Gaining in

confidence, she criticises that “kind of feminism” that simply pushes for more women CEOs and female politicians. We know that the presence of female politicians does not guarantee a feminist politics, she reminds us. After all, look at how Harriet Hartman, the Deputy Leader of Labour, waved through the welfare cuts! Look at our PM Theresa May! Applause ensues. (excerpt from field notes from the World Transformed Festival, Liverpool, 9/24/16).

These three vignettes are drawn from research we recently undertook examining the status and character of feminism within different strands of left politics in Britain.¹ During the course of our research, we frequently encountered claims that left politics in Britain was becoming more hospitable to, and supportive of, feminist practices and ideas. This intuition was expressed quite confidently by one prominent left-wing commentator who boldly remarked that “the culture of the Left is changing and feminism is winning the argument” (Seymour 2013).

But if Richard Seymour is correct to claim that feminism does seem to be finding some breathing space within left politics, the question of how to identify, describe and evaluate these cultural and political changes remains. After all, it is not entirely clear what the left will look like once feminism has “won” the argument. In order to track this putative transformation of the left as a fluid, contested and complex process, we need a multi-dimensional conceptual framework which allows us to capture and assess the ways in which feminism can be simultaneously affirmed and marginalised within left spaces and organisations (or indeed any political space).

The primary aim of this article, therefore, is to develop a distinctive set of criteria which can help us trace the extent to which particular instances of left-wing politics can be described as “feminist”. To carry out this task, we will draw on the work and ideas of several feminist thinkers, relying particularly on the concepts of “embodied performance” and “affect”. A secondary aim of the article is empirical and involves exploring the utility of this framework in the context of several recent renditions of British left politics, including, but not limited to, the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership. Although we can provide neither a systematic nor comprehensive overview, we do hope to offer a glimpse of the ways in which left politics is transforming its practices and modes of representation in light of feminist pressure and inspiration. Finally, given that we share a normative commitment to a “feminist” vision and

enactment of left politics, we seek to contribute to ongoing discussions about the possibilities for, and obstacles to, the cultivation of more “pro-feminist” forms of left politics.

We pursue these aims across four parts of the article. In the first section, we provide some necessary political context for our discussion of feminism and the British left and justify our case selection. In the second we review the current state of play with respect to the putative conceptual relationship between feminism and the left. More concretely, here we take stock of the claims being made about these two movements in the academic literature and political commentary, highlight the central assumptions on which they rest and suggest a reframing of the central categories under discussion including that of “feminism”, “feminisation” and the “left”. Having done this conceptual ground clearing, in the third section we outline five conceptual categories – “analysis and self-understanding”, “policy and campaigning”, “organisation”, “embodied performance” and “affect” – that, we argue, are essential to mapping the extent and degree to which a politics may be characterised as “more or less feminist”. In an effort to illustrate these dimensions of what we call “feministisation”, we turn to empirical examples of contemporary left political practices. In the final, concluding, section, we review the conceptual, empirical and normative/political insights of the article as a whole.

Our overall argument has both conceptual and empirical dimensions. Conceptually, we argue that both the socialist feminist literature and the gender and politics literature on “feminisation”, although instructive starting points, do not provide sufficient resources to trace or evaluate the infusion (or not) of feminism into left politics. This is because while the former has preoccupied itself with explaining the left’s epistemological resistance to feminism, the latter has focused its energies on defending the role that women’s presence (in terms of numbers and ideas) can have on feminising politics. But, as we shall suggest, to fully capture the complex, contradictory gender dynamics of left-wing spaces requires us to reach beyond the “politics of presence” and explore features of social life better elaborated in sociology and cultural studies, i.e., embodied performances and affective relations.

At the empirical level, we tentatively propose that there may be less “dissonance” between feminism and British left politics than the extant literature suggests. More concretely, we claim here that there is evidence of feministisation across all our five categories, especially in relation to “organisation” and “policy”. Having said this, this is not a one way process: the ubiquity of masculinised modes of embodied performance, problematic affective relations and a notable

(and surprising) lack of clarity with respect to feminist conceptual insights, all constitute countervailing forces that remind us that there are no guarantees and that this process is as fragile as it is interesting and innovative.

Feminism and the British Left: A Word on Context and Case Selection

Before launching into the main body of our analysis, we need to say a few words about the wider context of the British left, the empirical cases that we draw on, and our methodology. We begin by clarifying the contours of what we mean by “the British left”. Simplifying somewhat, there are three key constituent elements of the British left. The first of these is the Labour Party, by some distance the dominant player in the history of the British left. Labour’s hegemonic position within the British left is in part down to the UK’s two party system (and associated single member plurality voting system), but is also a reflection of Labour’s self-perception as a “broad church” containing several different political tendencies. These range from something akin to Marxist-inflected socialism (the so-called “hard left”), via a more “soft left” vision of parliamentary social democracy through to a more humane and redistributive rendering of neoliberal capitalism, the latter of which became especially dominant during the New Labour government of 1997-2010 (Gilbert 2017). Organisationally, the Labour Party has tended to derive much of its strength from its close association with the trade union movement: although the link between Labour and the trade unions has weakened over recent decades, the connection is showing some signs of strengthening and, both within and beyond the Labour Party, trade unions remain a significant organisational force within British left politics.

The second key strand of the British left concerns those small political parties explicitly situated to the left of the Labour Party (often aligned with various strands of Trotskyism, Marxism and revolutionary socialism). Most of these have been fairly small and have struggled to wield a great deal of political visibility and influence. However, some (for instance the old Communist Party of Great Britain and the ill-fated George Galloway-led Respect) have succeeded in returning MPs to parliament, while others – such as the International Marxist Group in the 1960s, the Socialist Workers’ Party for much of the late twentieth century, or Left Unity in 2013-15 – have played significant roles in mobilising grassroots opposition to capitalism, racism, imperialism etc. (Callaghan 1987).

The third and final key force constituting “the British Left” are grassroots social movements which, as elsewhere, have been central to re-shaping cultural and political life in the UK since the 1960s. Prominent, in this context, have been the efforts feminist, anti-racist and queer/LGBT to forge some space within the wider British left. Indeed, despite a high preponderance of socialist feminists within the Women’s Liberation Movement in the UK (Rowbotham 1989), there has always been an uneasy relationship between (predominantly white) feminist movements and other strands of the left, including the Labour Party. While this can be partly explained by the patriarchal attitudes and practices of the left at the time, it was also reinforced by feminist commitments to decentralisation and inclusion, an ethos that was in stark contrast to the hierarchical, elite oriented party machines of the left, with New Labour under Tony Blair offering no exception to this trend (Bashevkin 2000, 409). A similar state of tension shaped relations between black women’s organising and other left groupings, including white feminism. In this case, ignorance and racism on the part of white feminists as well as sexism on the part of male activists pushed black women into autonomous organising from the late 70s onwards (Patel 2001). Again, both the Old and New Labour Party were seen as tolerating rather than embracing the needs and aspirations of the black community, despite a well established tradition of black and anti-racist activism within the Labour Party, especially in London (Shukra 1998). More recently, grassroots black and anti-racist activism has once again achieved a renewed prominence partly, though by no means exclusively, due to the racialised character of Brexit (Bhambra, 2017), but also thanks to grassroots movements such as Grime#Corbyn, Justice for Grenfell and Black Lives Matter UK (though the latter has been less prominent than its US counterpart).² Furthermore, the simultaneous resurgence of anti-racist and feminist activism has re-ignited longstanding debates about racial hierarchies and inclusivity within feminist and wider left movements (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). In sum, the British left has developed on fractious terrain in which a diverse mix of institutional and social movement forces have struggled together and apart to challenge as well as negotiate the fraught relations between gender, race and class.

Against this historical backdrop, a number of significant recent developments prompted us to ask questions about the precise character of feminism’s contested status in UK left politics today. These include a resurgence of grassroots feminist activism which has extended its political and cultural reach in recent years (Evans 2015) as well as the rise of student, anti-racist and Occupy/anti-austerity movements in response to the financial crisis of 2008 (Bailey 2014; authors, 2016). Moreover, the fallout from a serious mishandling of an allegation of rape against

a senior member of the Socialist Workers' Party in 2013 forced many on the left to admit that there was a need to “get their house in order” on the issues of male violence against women and gender parity (interview with Left Unity activist, 5/4/15; see also Downes 2017). Last but not least, Corbyn's victory as leader of the Labour Party – now consolidated following Labour's improved performance in the 2017 UK General Election – has seen a revitalisation of left politics in a country highly divided about Brexit. More specifically, under Corbyn's leadership, Labour has adopted a more explicitly “left” policy programme and has seen a vast expansion of its membership base, partly re-constituting Labour as a grassroots movement rather than a parliamentary-oriented party (Seymour 2016). This in turn has re-ignited longstanding debates about the contested place of feminism within the ranks of the Labour Party, for although it historically has been seen as the natural “home” for feminism in British party politics, its record on gender has always been patchy (Childs 2004; Krook and Nugent 2016), and views as to the “feminist-friendliness” of Corbyn's Labour have proved highly polarised.

In light of these developments within British left politics we have, over the past five years, carried out a study of four different left sites, seeking to ascertain the precise contours of feminism's presence (or lack thereof) within British left politics. The four sites vary in terms of their historical origins, their status as party or movement, and their precise ideological flavour (although all four profess to being opposed to neoliberalism and austerity). However, our case selection was motivated by the fact that all four cases met two key criteria. First, they are all sufficiently large in size and scope, and visible in their activity, to count as key players on the UK left scene in recent years (and thus we focussed on these rather than the myriad micro-sects and proto-parties that one finds on the British left). Second, they have all expressed, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways, a desire to cultivate more feminist-friendly and intersectionally-oriented rendering of left politics, underpinned by a commitment to participatory, horizontal forms of organising. Three of our cases were studied intensively from 2013-2015. These were: Left Unity, a newly established political party, espousing mainly socialist/Marxist views, but seeking to build a broader, non-sectarian left politics; the Peoples' Assembly Against Austerity, a left alliance of trade unionists, Labour MPs, political commentators and local community campaign groups; and, finally, a broad assortment of non-aligned left activists associated with Occupy London and the student movement. In the last two years we shifted our focus to Momentum, a grassroots campaign/activist group which was founded to support and popularise the policies of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. In all cases, we have conducted semi-structured interviews with activists (135 in total), participant observation

in a range of field sites (street demonstrations, local and national gatherings, Left Unity and Labour Party conferences including the Momentum organised ‘World Transformed Festival’ in Liverpool in 2016) and have undertaken document analysis (e.g. Party manifestos, political pamphlets etc.).

Left politics and “feministisation”: mapping the conceptual terrain

Having set out the historical and empirical context, this section clarifies our conceptual lines of enquiry. Primarily, we aim to rethink the fraught and much-discussed “marriage” between feminism and the left. Most scholarship on this subject emphasises the left’s resistance to feminist insights and practices. Socialist feminist theorists have, for example, produced a significant quantity of invaluable work documenting and seeking to rectify what Abigail Bakan (2012) names as the epistemological dissonance between Marxism and feminism (Hartmann 1981; Eisenstein 1979; Vogel 1983). This “dissonance” inheres in a number of often competing features of Marxist and feminist thought including their understandings of time and temporality, the agents of political transformation, the relative status and importance of race, class and gender, and the relationship between activism and scholarship (Bakan 2012). In addition, Janet Conway has described how feminist knowledges are potentially at odds with the universalism of Marxist thought by virtue of being practice-based and situated (i.e., grounded in experience of practical politics), non-hegemonic (i.e. sensitive to context and locatedness), alert to difference (i.e. they entail dialogue and coalition-building) and pluralistic (i.e. they acknowledge and affirm epistemic and political pluralism) (Conway 2013, 137-140). To this extent, feminism’s established ways of “knowing” are often framed as in tension with Marxist and socialist insights.

In addition to these conceptual tensions, feminist scholars have also argued that this pervasive “intransigence within the left... to feminist critique” (Bakan 2012, 62) plays out, not just epistemically, but also at the level of political practices. In fact much of the feminist literature on the British left – both historically and in the present – draws attention to the ubiquity of traditional forms of left masculinity and traditional gendered divisions of political labour (Hartmann 1981; Aruzza 2013; Rowbotham 2013; Coleman and Bassi 2011; Bakan 2012). For instance, Lara Coleman and Serena Bassi, in their study of anti-imperialist and anarchist activism, identify two widespread modes of idealised left masculinity. First, they point to the “Man With Analysis”, characterised by a form of “black and white” reasoning which allows

little room for self-doubt or emotion (Coleman and Bassi 2011, 211). Second, the “Anarchist Action Man”, by contrast, accrues status in left-wing spaces through a commitment to action, especially through violent confrontation with police (ibid., 215). Abigail Bakan introduces a third modality of idealised left masculinity, “Communist Urgent Man”, whose radicalism inheres in his insistence on the importance of quickly understanding and seizing the moment: more slow-burning, probing questions (such as those to do with gender and race) are framed as mere distractions (Bakan 2012, 70).

Interestingly, in addition to claims that the left is recalcitrant to feminism, a second argument has emerged of late that suggests that the splitting off of feminism from the left has occurred as a result of the current trajectory of feminist movements and ideas. Nancy Fraser and Hester Eisenstein, for example, chastise feminism for letting the state “off the hook” through their complicity with NGOisation and for becoming distracted by so called “identity politics”, not to mention allowing the “dream of women’s emancipation” to be harnessed “to the engine of capitalist accumulation” (Fraser 2009, 110-11; Eisenstein 2009). Similarly, Angela McRobbie bemoans the fact that in the Britain feminism has become instrumentalised and individualised by neoliberal cultural logics (McRobbie 2009). This generalised anxiety or “co-optation blues” (Smith 2006) with the contemporary direction of feminism has yielded a rich body of feminist self-examination in which the institutionalisation of feminist movements (Lang 1997; Prügl 2015), the “mainstreaming” of gender issues in state and market governance structures (Kantola and Squires 2012) and the discursive appropriation of feminist concepts (Stratigaki 2004) have been subjected to critical scrutiny. In these accounts, feminism has lost its way, unwittingly colluding in a neoliberal politics that seeks its domestication and de-radicalisation.

Although this is an impressive and laudable manifestation of self-reflexivity, which arguably strengthens feminism as a movement, one ironic consequence of this candid analysis is the view that feminism can no longer be seen as a reliable ally of the left. Indeed, Fraser calls for “the reposition[ing] of feminism squarely on the Left” (2009, 116) and Eisenstein pleads with feminists to get on with “mending the break with the left” (2009, 202). This, in turn, feeds into the much longer established view amongst a number on the left that feminism - understood as a form of “identity politics” which has increasingly gained an insider status within capitalist forums – does not and cannot, in its current articulation, form part of a left politics (author, 2015).

Notwithstanding this commonly held view that feminism and the left have gone their separate ways, the recent transformations of the left in Britain, noted in the previous section, give us reason to heed Lynne Segal's call to pay closer attention to the ways in which the gendered cultures of left politics can and do change in response to feminist critique and, in so doing, produce "a more nuanced account of left culture, and of the impact of feminism within it" (Segal 1989, 14). In order to capture this fraught process of transformation in which feminism is simultaneously endorsed and contained across a range of social, political and cultural sites, we shall invoke the term "feministisation", a notion deployed, in passing by, Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs (2015, 155), but left undeveloped. Although a little jarring phonetically, we chose this concept precisely because it speaks to, but is distinct from the more familiar notion of "feminisation". The latter has become something of a mainstay in recent literature on gender and mainstream politics, particularly since the publication of Joni Lovenduski's now classic *Feminising Politics* in 2005. Lovenduski's work has given rise to a rich and extensive array of analyses of opportunities for, and obstacles to, the representation of women in decision-making institutions in a wide variety of arenas. Conceptually, this body of literature, which typically defines feminisation as "the insertion and integration of women both in terms of numbers and ideas" (Lovenduski 2005, 12), has tended to focus on the often uneven connections between descriptive and substantive representation of women, i.e. the conditions under which women's numerical presence translates into the substantive promotion of "women's interests" (Celis et al 2014; Phillips 1995).

In a context where our interest is in mapping the presence, or lack thereof, of feminist politics, the term feminisation, as it is currently used, is potentially problematic. As Campbell and Childs as well as the activist from Feminist Fightback in the opening quotes, all pertinently remind us, the fact that women politicians can and often do defend a distinctly anti-feminist politics should lead us to be sceptical of "any claim that the integration of women's issues and perspectives in politics can only ever mean the inclusion and integration of feminist issues, perspectives and interests" (Campbell and Childs 2015, 155). In light of this, they argue that feminisation cannot be automatically equated with feministisation (*ibid.*, 150; see also Celis and Childs 2012)

A further limitation of the notion of feminisation is that it renders intersectional analysis – for us, a *sine qua non* when defining what constitutes a feminist politics – impracticable. In other words, it is not entirely clear how the theory and practice of intersectionality, understood both as an identity and as a configuration of power, can be reconciled with the Lovenduski and

Pitkin-inspired language of feminisation. For us, the latter runs the risk of downplaying difference and contestation among women and feminist actors, a move which has long been questioned by black and postcolonial feminists (Lorde 1984; Ang 1995). Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that gender and politics scholarship has started to move away from the language of feminisation and descriptive/substantive representation towards a more constructivist account of “representative claim-making” (Celis et al 2014).

Our final concern with feminisation is its rather narrow scope to the extent that it foregrounds visible or tangible outcomes with respect to the demographic composition of the constituency under study or their policy decisions. To be fair, this limitation has been tempered somewhat by the recent emergence of feminist institutionalism (Kenny 2014; Krook and MacKay 2011), an approach that foregrounds the ways in which both formal and informal rules and norms shape the gendered power dynamics of various kinds of political institutions. Despite this effort, however, we feel that the challenge of capturing elusive, but equally palpable features of a political space – such as mood, aesthetics and styles of dress, speech and comportment – remains, and requires us to expand our analytical toolkit beyond the purview of political science to encompass methods from cultural studies, sociology and anthropology. Moreover, in addition to expanding the range of relevant features, our research highlights the importance of paying attention to the relations between them for they are not always aligned. In other words, a party may pursue policies that can be framed as pro-feminist, but still play host to deeply gendered and/or explicitly sexist cultures that serve to marginalise individual feminists and feminism as a political ethos.

Having defended the need to move beyond the popular notion of “feminisation” to “feministisation”, we must now define our other two key units of analysis. Turning to feminism first, we are referring to a politics that embodies a “shared principled commitment to challenging gender hierarchies” (Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001, 1158). In our view this exercise requires an acknowledgment and analysis of injustice, a vision of an alternative, even if inchoate, and a range of collective and individual actions to resist and overturn this injustice that includes, but cannot be reduced to, public expressions of protest. In addition to these three components, feminism today has increasingly become associated with intersectional analyses and practices. Intersectionality emerged in the late 80s as a means of foregrounding the erasure of black women from feminist theory and practice (Crenshaw 1991), and has now become commonly accepted, at least in principle, in contemporary feminist theory and politics (Hancock

2016; Davis 2008). Intersectionality directs our attention towards a range of inequalities and stereotypes - around race, class, sexuality, and disability – which cut across gender and serve to impoverish not only women in different ways, but also men (Nash, 2008; Collins and Bilge 2016). In this sense then feminism can be framed, as bell hooks suggests, as an emancipatory project that seeks social justice “for everyone” (hooks 2000; author 2010, 122). Given that this definition conceptualises feminism primarily as a movement, rather than a form of self-identity, it should be clear that it can be enacted and expressed by people of all genders. Of course self-identified women are still more likely to advance feminism than self-identified men, but this is not an absolute. In fact, during our interviews with left-wing activists levels of enthusiasm for feminism did not always map cleanly on to interviewees’ gender identities.

This conception of feminism speaks to and from a distinctive understanding of “the left”. Drawing on the work of Noberto Bobbio (1996) and Steven Lukes (2003) we define the left as a political project animated by the “emotive value of equality” (Bobbio 1996, 65). While taking historically grounded and context specific forms, this project is based on a shared moral objection to “unjustifiable but remedial inequalities of status, rights, powers and condition” and a commitment to “rectify” them through political action (Lukes 2003, 612). For those on the left, therefore, inequality is a socially created problem, one that is sustained through “customs, laws and coercion” (Bobbio 1996, 67) and that can and should be overturned with political will and collective political action. Given this conception of the left, it should be evident, as Bobbio reminds us, that all variants of the feminist movement, whether liberal egalitarian, social democrat, socialist/Marxist or anarchist, are on the left to the extent that they share a commitment to overturning socially created gender inequalities, however and wherever they manifest themselves (1996, 67).

Now of course we realise that arguing that feminism is already, pace Fraser, “squarely on the left” is contentious, especially in light of the growing literature, alluded to above, on the myriad of ways in which feminist and women’s movements are being instrumentalised, appropriated and demobilised. And we are by no means suggesting that the detailed mappings of feminism gone wrong in these cases are not important reminders of the current limits of and dangers inherent in any collective effort at transformation. What we do want to propose, however, is that the lessons taken from these narratives of feminism “lost” need to be mitigated by a number of related insights. First, that conceptualising a political project as an ideal type and identifying its central normative features is a different exercise from forensically examining a particular

instantiation of it, in a specific locale. Both activities are valuable if for no other reason that the former move provides some normative reference points when undertaking the latter critical interrogation. In other words, without some sense of what feminism is for and against, at least in principle, it becomes impossible to empirically assess claims about either co-optation or feministisation (author 2013). Second, processes such as co-optation, de-politicisation or even feministisation must be understood as fluid and uneven, rather than fixed, all-encompassing states that are irreversible. Indeed, for some time now feminist scholars have pushed back against simple narratives of co-optation, arguing for more nuanced, fine grained conceptual and empirical analyses of the good, bad and ugly of feminist activism (Alvarez 1999; Bernal and Grewal 2014; author 2013; Roy 2015). In a similar vein, we propose examining contemporary left politics in Britain as a site of contradictory logics which allow for concrete expressions to be more or less feminist in terms of degree and scope, rather than fully feminist or not at all. Third, that movements, including feminism as well as other strands of left politics, always yield intended and unintended consequences and, therefore, may or may not contribute to progressive ends in a particular moment in time and space. To this extent, an arguably feminist inspired practice can result in what some will see as non-feminist outcomes. To come to this conclusion, however, requires some explicit or implicit criteria to assess both the intent and the outcomes: recognising feminism as belonging to a long left tradition of thought and practice gives us at least a starting point to undertake this self-reflexive process.

In sum, in order to resist premature epitaphs about the death of feminism as well as overly optimistic proclamations about a full “feminist turn” in British left politics, we need to equip ourselves with the conceptual and analytical tools to recognise the presence of its core features (or absence therefore) in an array of empirical cases and to map and assess its changing shape and vitality in each.

Feministisation: a framework for analysis

Having set out the aims and conceptual terrain, the following sections sketch what we consider to be the five features of “feministisation”: analysis and self-understanding (which refers to self-identity as well as a theoretical worldview), policy/campaigning (which refers to the goals and implementation of policies as well as campaigns for specific policies), organisation (which refers to the formal organisational structures in place to promote feminists/feminism), embodied performance (which refers to the styles of speech, dress and comportment of activists), and,

finally, affect (which refers to the moods, feelings and emotions reflective of, and conducive to, feminist politics). Taken together, these dimensions enable the analyst to diagnose the nature and extent of the feministisation of a political space, while also allowing her to highlight points of tensions and contradictions across them. They also potentially facilitate normative evaluation by providing a “checklist” through which to come to a preliminary judgement as to an organisation’s feminist credentials.

We have derived these categories from two main sources. The first is the existing scholarship on gender and (left) politics (Bakan 2012; Conway 2013; author 2010); the “feminisation” literature in political science (Lovenduski 2005); and an array of other feminist research on gender and organisations (Kenny 2014; Puwar 2004), gender and social movements (Coleman and Bassi 2011) and the politics of affect (author 2014; Ahmed 2004). Our second source was our primary research. While document analysis and our interviewees prompted us to pay attention to the analyses, policies and organisational rules of different left groups/spaces, our fascination with embodied performance and affect emerged in the context of our field work. Indeed, it was our personal experiences in a range of bustling, energetic and sometimes fraught left sites which convinced us that the general “feel” of the room and the personal interactions therein were crucial factors in shaping the space available for women, as equal participants, and feminism as a set of ideas, ideals and practices.

Analysis and Self-Understanding

By identifying analysis and self-understanding, as a discrete category of examination, we want to draw attention to two interconnected phenomena. On the one hand, we want to underline the ways in which participants in left spaces self-describe and give meaning to their activism. On the other, we want to explore their broader understanding of what constitutes left politics and the role that feminism, as a body of thought, has in this picture. In other words, do they self-identify as feminists and to what extent do they incorporate feminist theoretical insights into their diagnoses of the world they are trying to change?

To capture this dimension methodologically, one would need to undertake textual analysis of the particular organisations’ manifestos and/or position papers as well as semi-structured interviews. To this end, one would need to be curious about how power relations are conceptualised, the place of gender in this schema and its role with respect to other power

relations such as race, class and sexuality. In addition, one might ask what they think the most important sources of knowledge are – texts, experts, experience, or some combination thereof – and more particularly which feminist insights they affirm and/or reject. On this question it would be important to note whether feminism is subject to what Pereira (2013, 291) calls “epistemic splitting” – i.e. the domestication of feminism by demarcating some feminist insights as valuable and others as undesirable. Finally, some inquiry into the role of the public/private divide would be instructive.

Turning first to the question of self-identity, we were favourably impressed by the willingness of many of our interviewees to either explicitly self-identify as “feminist” or to at least register the importance of aligning oneself as an ally of feminism. This was true of activists across the left spectrum from Left Unity to Momentum. As one interviewee – a prominent male left activist in Left Unity – told us:

“I mean there’s definitely a shift on a big part of the socialist left ... towards ah acknowledging ... and embracing ah feminism, fourth wave feminism, you know? It has been very important to opening a lot of people up to that” (interview with male Left Unity activist, 7/27/14)

In a similar vein, another Left Unity activist pointed out to us that “women’s liberation needs to be at the core of any new organisation, and ... needs to be at the forefront of any struggle” (interview with female Left Unity activist, 5/4/14). This sentiment was echoed by non-aligned student activists, one of whom rather optimistically announced to us that “a newer kind of more vibrant liberationary left-wing politics” was now “totally ubiquitous” on the student left (interview with male student activist, 10/4/13).

This allegiance with feminism as an identity and as a set of ideals, was similarly evident among Momentum activists, although it was particularly noticeable among the younger generation. Speaking to an activist within Welsh Labour Grassroots (the sister organisation of Momentum in Wales), we were told that, “Yes, I would say we were very feminist. I don’t think anybody ... wouldn’t describe themselves as a feminist, the men included” (interview with female activist, 11/03/16). Reinforcing this view, another pro-Corbyn activist boldly retorted: “I’d find it very odd if we weren’t (feminist and anti-racist). ... “ when asked about the feminist orientation of Momentum and then went on to distance his group from other

strands of the left by saying they were “predominantly male, white and old” (interview with one of the founding organisers of Momentum 4/19/16). It is important to note that this confidence in the feminist credentials of Momentum was tempered somewhat by some of our black female interviewees who, while conceding that Momentum was at least “woman conscious” (interview with prominent Momentum activist 09/27/16), if not fully feminist, insisted that it still had work to do on the race front. As another activist from BARAC (Black Activists Rising Against Cuts), UK explained: “a lot of the white left still don’t get race and racism, and if I had a pound for every time somebody says what I’m about to tell you I’d be very, very rich right now, yeah? I could give up work. ‘Oh it’s not about race, it’s about class’”. She went on to tell us, however, that the politics of Jeremy Corbyn and (shadow chancellor) John McDonnell made a big difference to the prospects of Labour becoming more explicitly anti-racist saying that “now we’ve got a good chance, we’re got a stronger chance, and things are changing” (interview with female black activist 9/27/16).

Interestingly, activists were far less forthcoming and confident in their answers when probed about their theoretical understanding of feminism and how it might contribute to an alternative analysis of power and social justice. Although all our interviewees were dedicated, in principle, to resisting the oppression of women, black and minority ethnic groups and the working class, perhaps unsurprisingly, relatively few had a clear cut conception of how these different axes of oppression intersected and how they should be tackled. And when they did, it often involved, at least in more traditional left spaces such as Left Unity, subsuming gender as a power relation to capitalism and feminism, as a politics, to Marxism and/or socialism. So, one male interviewee told us that he did not really need to self-describe as a feminist because his primary identification as a “communist” already encompassed feminist politics (interview with male student activist, 1/9/14). Another student and trade union activist explained that, although she thought intersectionality was crucial, she still viewed capitalism as “more structural” than gender and race (interview with female student and trade union activist, 10/5/13). This default position is captured nicely by the following declaration:

“by saying I’m a women’s liberationist [I’m saying that] we believe that women need to be liberated from the structures that cause it in the first place. That it’s ... a classed society that causes women’s oppression not ... men and male genes” (interview with female left activist, 3/27/14).

This disjuncture between the use of feminism as an identity, on the one hand, and as an analytical framework that requires an intersectional theorisation of power, on the other, was equally evident in the far less doctrinaire left of Momentum. So one key founder of the organisation honestly admitted to us that:

“Anti-racist and feminist are not going to be ... terms that anyone has any problems with, but if you start to say, you know, I imagine there would be some people who would sort of curl their lip slightly at say intersectionality, but if you just say, ... gender or something else then they'd be fine” (interview with male activist in Momentum, 4/19/16)

This view chimes with the fact that, in the main, when asked about how they were tackling gender exclusions, most of our interviewees enthusiastically told us about their procedures to ensure gender or racial parity by means of quotas for committees and panels and through the establishment of women's caucuses and other liberation strands (i.e. descriptive representation). A more in-depth, comprehensive conceptualisation of how gender, race and class operate in left spaces and beyond was less evident, although some did note the need for such a perspective. In sum, at the level of “analysis”, we found support for feminism, as an identity and set of ideals, to be alive and well and, on the more pluralistic left (student activism and Momentum) flourishing. Having said this, the reach of feministisation begins to ebb when we consider the limited integration of feminism, understood as a theoretical diagnosis of unjust, intersecting power relations that cuts across the private and public sphere.

Policy and Campaigning

To frame “policy and campaigning” as a dimension of feministisation is to examine the extent to which feminism is substantively represented in the declared policies and goals of an organisation, party or movement. It invites us to ask to what extent, and in what ways, the communities and organisations under investigation seek to challenge unequal gendered power relations. More specifically, it encourages us to first explore the specific gender/feminist policies that the organisations support and then go on and examine whether gender is further mainstreamed into all the policies and practices of the organisation, i.e. is gender

equality/awareness factored into policies and campaigns that are not self-evidently about gender, feminism or women?

On both counts, although the record is somewhat mixed, the breadth and depth of support for feminist-inflected policy in British left movements is reassuring. Indeed, we found a wide variety of instances of left-wing groups actively supporting feminist policy goals. For example, Left Unity expressed strong solidarity for reproductive rights struggles in Ireland and Spain (authors 2016, 44), and its 2015 Manifesto incorporated a wide-ranging programme of gender equality including fully-funded state provision of childcare, a programme of affirmative action for women in the work place, unconditional access to abortion and contraception, inclusive sex and relationship education, and enhanced specialist services for women asylum seekers (Left Unity, 2015). Similarly, the 2017 Labour Party election manifesto had a standalone section entitled simply “Women” (Labour Party 2017, 109-110) which promised access to abortion services across the UK, the appointment of a Violence Against Women Commissioner to ensure funding for rape crisis centres and women’s refuges, and a programme for the expansion of the rights of women workers.

With respect to the mainstreaming of gender across policy programmes, there was a notable distance between Corbyn’s Labour Party and some of the “extra-parliamentary” left groups we studied. So while both Left Unity and the People’s Assembly did stress the gendered impacts of austerity policies, we found little to no general discussion about gender politics and feminism outside of this context either at the Peoples’ Assembly conference in London or at the Left Unity policy conference in Manchester (both in March 2014). In other words, not only were issues such as welfare, austerity, taxation, health and the economy given priority, but when gender was added to this list it was treated as a discrete policy area. By contrast, in the 2017 Labour Manifesto, in addition to the standalone section on “Women”, there are references to the impact of policies on women in relation to childcare and early years education, apprenticeships, employment rights, pensions, disability rights, police and crime, diplomacy and development. What is more, the manifesto promises that “a Labour government will gender audit all policy and legislation for its impact on women before implementation” (Labour Party 2017, 109). A further significant change is that as of 2017 the annual National Women’s conference, held every year at the start of the Labour Conference is to be afforded a formal policy making role, rather than being merely a “talking shop”, intended to reflect Labour’s commitment to mainstreaming gender-sensitivity within its broader policy-making processes.

So without wishing to sound naively sanguine, the resurgence of parliamentary left politics under Corbyn's Labour has provided some not insignificant scope for feminist policies and ideas to garner broad support not only within the activist left, but to some extent within the wider electorate. Within our other left sites, however, support for feminist policy tended to be more targeted and specific. As such, the recent rise of the Labour left has, broadly, been positive from a feminist policy point of view.

Organisation

Whilst policy and campaigning refers to the outward facing activism enacted by a left-wing group or community, our third dimension of feministisation, "organisation", refers to the internal structures and formal rules of a group. Methodologically, we garnered our evidence from textual analysis of publicly available policy documents relating to regulations, codes of practice and procedures, and from interviews with activists who were asked about the formal measures/procedures their movements/organisations had in place to combat gendered and other kinds of power inequalities. Their responses included the use of quotas guaranteeing a certain percentage of women representatives; the use of caucuses and promotion of autonomous organisation for oppressed groups (sometimes called "liberation strands"); safe space policies that guard against hierarchical or abusive behaviour, childcare provision at conferences and events; and ensuring meetings take place during family friendly times and in family friendly places (such as community centres rather than pubs) (Segal 1989, 13).

In addition to these formal mechanisms, we understand feministisation to refer to the pursuit of participatory, egalitarian and anti-hierarchical modes of organisation (author 2010). This commitment is underpinned by a scepticism towards strict divisions of labour that characterise male dominated organisation institutions (Cockburn 1991). Capturing this ethos, Meyer and Whittier, describe it as encompassing:

“egalitarian participation by all group members, consensus decision-making, rotation of key tasks and roles among members, and attention to the emotions and interactions of participants in addition to the pursuit of instrumental goals” (Meyer and Whittier 1994, 289).

An approximation of this model of organising – coupled with an aversion to the hierarchy that has often characterised Leninist politics in Britain (Callaghan 1987; Rowbotham 2013) – might therefore constitute further confirmation of feminist gains in this area.

It is at the level of organisation that we found the most compelling evidence of feministisation. Several interviewees described a shift on the left towards an emphasis on a more participatory, horizontalist ethos (Cooper and Hardy 2013). An older male activist, for instance, talked about the recent emergence of what he called a “looser sense of movementism”, particularly among younger activists, which, in his view, reflected their burgeoning interest in feminism and anarchism (interview with male Left Unity activist, 4/10/14).

In addition, we found widespread use of, and support for, women-only caucuses. There is a Momentum Women’s Group which acts as a forum for discussion and support for women members. In addition, regional representatives on Momentum’s National Coordinating Group must be at least 50% women. Defending this quota system, one founding member of Momentum told us: “if your group is unable to put a woman in a position of leadership then, . . . you’re not adhering to, you’re not like part of the political outlook of the organisation” (interview with male activist 4/19/16). Similarly, Left Unity has a women’s caucus and has also enshrined the use of gender quotas that ensures 50/50 gender representation on all of its representative bodies, a move that is, in the view of one senior female member, “historically unusual for the British left” (interview with Left Unity activist, 4/15/14). Furthermore, anti-hierarchical forms of self-organising by marginalised groups remains pervasive across the student left.

In conclusion, we found that enshrining gender equality within left organisations was primarily understood in terms of descriptive representation and pursued through structures/policies that ensured the visible presence of women. The exception to this approach could be found within student and Occupy movements, where “safe space” policies, intended to promote a feminist culture of empathy and understanding, suggested a different, more expansive conception of inclusion. While safe space policies have proved controversial in some circles – particularly among the Marxist left who have sometimes regarded them as an obstacle to working class solidarity (McNair 2014) – their prevalence among the student left in Britain, alongside the stress on ensuring descriptive representation within the more institutionalised left, points to important strides towards feministisation, at least in terms of “organisation”.

Embodied Performance

In proposing that embodied performance is a crucial element of feministisation, we take inspiration from a wave of old and new literature that highlights the importance of performance for the understanding of politics (Rai 2015; Rai and Renelt 2014; Velten 2012; Coleman and Bassi 2011) and everyday life (Young 1980). Iris Marion Young's now classic 1980 essay "Throwing Like a Girl" aimed to "trace in a provisional way some of the basic modalities of feminine body compartment, manner of moving, and relations in space" (Young, 1980, 139) because, as she argued, they "may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence" (Young, 1980, 140). Learning from her, we want to claim that the collective embodied practices of a left space, far from being a superficial or merely aesthetic concern, can be "particularly revelatory" of how receptive it is to feminist insights and practices.

So what does the notion of embodied performance encompass and what might it look like? Drawing from this literature, we suggest that it includes the aesthetic dimensions of politics and, in particular, the role of verbal, sartorial and bodily norms. In this context, the role of rhetoric, i.e. what Alan Finlayson refers to as "inviting audiences to accept an argument" (Finlayson 2012, 760) also becomes important. More concretely, in the context of left politics, we are reminded by Coleman and Bassi as well as Bakan to be alert to the fact that left spaces provide oxygen for a range of problematic gendered presentations of self and others which reproduce "whiteness" and "hegemonic masculinity", albeit in different forms (see also Emejulu 2011; author 2015). So when men talk over or interrupt women (i.e. "mansplaining") or cultivate predominantly male social networks and friendship groups – what Elin Bjarnegård (2013, 24) calls "homosocial capital" – they are erecting obstacles for feministisation. Equally, insisting on talking, despite limited knowledge of the topic, or engaging in aggressive or confrontational practices such as fist-shaking or table-banging "may discourage women from being more active in terms of access, presence and agency" (Verge and de la Fuente 2014, 68).

Although clearly important in shaping a political space, embodied performance presents us with a number of methodological problems. To analyse and judge different forms of embodied performances and interactions in left spaces inevitably involves the subjective judgement of the individual researcher, a fact that pushes against the grain of so called "objective" analysis. Moreover, it is hard to analytically grasp practices that are implicit and not verbalised. Having

explored in some detail the methodological challenges of capturing the informal norms and practices operative in political spaces, feminist institutionalists confirm ethnography and participant observation, along with interviews, as the most reliable methods (Kenny 2014, 681; Krook and MacKay 2011; Bjarnegård 2013).

From our experiences, as left, self-identified feminist researchers, we found that embodied performances, marked by gender, were notable in two ways. First, we found evidence of different kinds of gendered performances which ranged from Bakan's "Communist Urgent Man", a repeated sight at the Marxism Festival we attended at University College London in 2013 to Coleman and Bassi's "Man with Analysis", glimpsed more than once at Left Unity meetings, to the more feminist performances we discovered at the "Women's People's Assembly" in London in February 2014 and at the Momentum organised "World Transformed Festival" in 2016. In terms of the first two categories, we witnessed and patiently listened to many men, speaking at length and at volume, untroubled by ambiguity and uncertainty, a theme picked up on by one student activist when she derided "the armchair theoretician [who is] just like talking about everything fucking Lenin has written ... you can't participate in those conversations and neither would you want to" (interview with female student activist, 12/16/13). Another bemoaned his encounter with the "the know it all socialist man who has an answer for everything" (interview with male student activist, 2/20/14). Taking in their performances, we were also struck by the particular aesthetics cultivated by these self-consciously "left men". Dressed in dowdy attire, featuring old ill-fitting jeans, a higher than average prevalence of beige and check shirts and, on the younger generation, German military attire, these men were able to signal a non-verbal assent to the wider subcultural norms of traditional left politics.

Providing a stark contrast to this was the "Women's People's Assembly" in February 2014. As it was a women's only event, only one of us could attend and she was struck by how different this space was from the numerous other People's Assembly gatherings she and her other male colleague had attended. With the SWP stall allowed only outside the confines of Conway Hall, where the event took place, the speeches, the audience reactions, the group interactions, which included a shared community prepared lunch, and even the colourful decorations and banners made the space feel distinct. Although the morning was dedicated to plenary talks – which were notably less hectoring in style, focusing more on delivering informative than rhetoric - the afternoon was organised around workshops where attendees were invited to participate and

share their personal stories. Encouragement was offered to speakers in the form of cheering and loud applause. Interestingly, some present still complained that it felt too “top-down”.

But gendered embodied performances not only differed across spaces, they also played a notable role in eliciting particular responses from the audience. So, in spaces marked by more masculine performances, we found that for women/feminists to be heard, they too had to adopt a masculine mode of intervention. The second opening quote of this article features a young female trade union activist at a Left Unity conference shooting up from her seat in front of hundreds of surprised participants and screaming angrily at a seated member of the audience for muttering rather loudly that class was being overridden by gender. The audience responded with rapturous applause. This was a job well done, but the lesson learned is that defending women and feminism, in this kind of left space, require fearless, confrontational belligerence.

In sum, we would argue that any “feministisation” of British left politics is significantly tempered by the continued prevalence of a series of gendered performances that display stubborn resistance to feminist critique.

Affect

Abigail Bakan remarks that “epistemological dissonance is not only intellectual... but also affective” (Bakan 2012, 65). Unlike the other dimensions, however, which refer to (relatively) clearly defined areas of left-wing practice, affect is produced in and through the other dimensions. So although we think it is important enough to merit discussion in its own right, it is not, strictly speaking, a distinctive dimension in and of itself.

What, precisely, do we mean by affect? Affect, for us, refers to the ways in which feelings, emotions and bodily sensations manifest themselves in and through political practices, in ways that, depending on context, serve to shore up, or disrupt, established ways of thinking about and practicing politics. As Jon Protevi argues, there is a productive ambiguity at the heart of the notion of affect. On the one hand, it refers to “being affected” – “the somatic change caused by an encounter with an object”, but it also refers to “the felt change in the power of the body, the increase or decrease in perfection, felt as sadness or joy”, i.e. something akin to what we might ordinarily call “emotion” (Protevi 2009, 49). More concretely, an alertness to affect points to two lines of inquiry. In the first instance, as Ringrose and Renold argue, “qualitative researchers

[should] spend more time considering data ‘hot spots’ – those affective relations ... that both ‘disconcert’ and create a sense of ‘wonder’ – where data ‘glows’ for the researcher in various moments of fieldwork, analysis and beyond” (Ringrose and Renold 2014, 773). To us, this highlights the value of honing in on particularly conspicuous or charged moments of “affective intensity” – such as a moment of particularly acute anger, disagreement, or joy – and to try to situate these within the broader affective dynamics of the research site (or “research assemblage”, to use what Ringrose and Renold’s Deleuze-inflected terminology).

But affect relates not only to that which is sudden, dramatic or disruptive. As Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman have argued, “mood” is one of the key modalities through which affect functions. Moods, they argue, “are usually described as ambient, vague, diffuse, hazy, and intangible, rather than intense, and they are often contrasted to emotions in having a longer duration” (Felski and Fraiman 2012, v). As such, the ambient mood of a political space can either disable or enable a particular way of thinking or acting (author 2014). So, for example, longstanding, deep rooted, affective investments in a particular conception of socialism can create an atmosphere that militates against feministisation. Conversely, the cultivation of intellectual generosity, sensitivity to difference, empathy and solidarity, can nurture it. To this extent, the “mood of a space” can clash with and undermine incremental advancements at the level of either analysis, policy or organisation.

Given that affect is very difficult to capture methodologically, it is unsurprising that, as Ringrose and Renold (2014, 772) note, it is often overlooked during the research process. After all, highlighting affect requires the researcher to find ways of tracing, “measuring” and describing collective and individual expressions of anger, displeasure, frustration, confusion, alienation and unease as well as more positive feelings of empathy, belonging, love, warmth, solidarity, friendship. Moreover, this exercise, once again, cannot be done without the subjective judgement of the researcher who is forced to examine his own affective response to his object of study.

These methodological challenges notwithstanding, we witnessed the bubbling up of “affective intensity” in a range of “hot spots”. One such moment included the real anger, revulsion and disorientation that we found among many on the left in response to the allegations of rape and harassment within the SWP. One interviewee recounted his feelings of “absolute horror” when he learned the full details of what had happened (interview with male student activist, 1/9/14)

while another longstanding SWP member expressed a sense of existential crisis: “has [my] life as a revolutionary been completely in vain, you know, . . . , have [I] been somehow duped into fronting a completely dishonourable project?” (interview with male Marxist activist, 4/9/14). Another “hot spot”, this time conversely suggesting that class politics still elicits far more excitement than feminism in some left contexts, was made visible to us at the People’s Assembly conference in March 2014. Here, a woman stood behind the podium and gave a short, matter of fact speech to a packed floor of about 800 people highlighting the gendered impact of austerity and the value of women’s autonomous organising. Although not overtly hostile, the audience’s response was somewhat muted, even disinterested, especially when compared to the next speech delivered by a male care-worker about a long-running industrial dispute which was greeted with rapturous applause and a spontaneous chant of “the workers united will never be defeated”! Clearly, in this case, the presence of feminist claims and ideas did not translate into a passionate, affective commitment to feminist insights.

Turning to the general “mood” of our research sites, we want to make a qualified defence of the view that at least some strands of the British left have experienced a degree of feministisation on this front. This is because for us a number of the more traditional left spaces we visited – for example Left Unity and the People’s Assembly – often felt less feminist than their pro-feminist policy programmes suggested, in part because of the widespread use of top down speaker/panel formats and the reliance of continued “mansplaining”. Where we did note a significant difference was at the “World Transformed” Festival in Liverpool in 2016, organised by Momentum, the pro-Corbyn grassroots organisation (Wainwright 2016). Here we were buoyed by the atmosphere and ethos of the event, at which participatory, interactive workshops (including a large number on race, feminism and related issues) predominated and the vibe, feel and aesthetics all worked together to make it a generally welcoming, inclusive and non-sectarian space. In one such workshop entitled “Making the Left Sexy” speakers explicitly addressed the question of the left’s “image problem”, arguing for an approach that was less “doom and gloom” and more affirmative, emotional and feminist in style. Clearly, these activists understood the importance of cultural style and mood.

Of course this is one event among many and we cannot be complacent about the degree of unease and awkwardness that still prevails, particularly among older men, in the face of feminism. The opening quote about “shuffling of feet” is an honest testament to this. Worse still is the tendency for some Corbyn supporters to engage in online abuse of women critical of

Corbyn's politics. The latter has led some to argue that Corbynism is marred by "brosocialism", i.e., a form of patriarchal masculinity manifest in, for example, online abuse of female critics (see, for example, Cosslett 2016). Pro-Corbyn feminists, in response, have contended that abuse is, sadly, prevalent across the political spectrum and that to frame Corbynism as uniquely patriarchal is to erase the work of socialist feminist women (Wilkinson, 2017). More broadly – and without denying the significant obstacles to "feministising" the British left – what we can do is take hope from the fact that there is now at least an explicit recognition among many on the left that their political spaces and practices should be – and, if not, need to be made – amenable to feminism and that this includes attention to the affective relations generated therein.

Conclusion

We want to end this article by revisiting our three initial aims in light of our findings. Starting with our empirical mapping, we are in no doubt that recent years have seen an upturn in the feministisation across the left including more traditional left organisations (the People's Assembly and Left Unity), spontaneous, horizontal pockets of youth activism and more hybrid formations such as Momentum. All of these spaces have been characterised by a greater willingness to self-identify as feminist; a recognition that there are multiple axes of oppressions that must be challenged by the left, even if there is still disagreement about the order that they must be tackled; efforts to raise awareness of and combat violence and abuse in left-wing communities; and the institutionalisation of equality guarantees such as quotas, and widespread use of autonomous organising by self-identified women.

Having said this, the extent of this feministisation process remains constrained by two main factors. First, as we have seen, there remains a degree of epistemological dissonance with regards to how feminism, as an analytical perspective on the world, should be integrated theoretically into a socialist conception of power and politics. In other words, socialist feminism, as an intellectual/political paradigm, let alone anarchist feminism, has not taken hold in these spaces. Our intuition here, however, is that this fact cannot be explained solely or even primarily in terms of ideological resistance, although there is some. Rather, we noted a degree of impatience, especially in the more recent renditions of the left, with what is interpreted as intellectualism/scholasticism and a preference for a more "pragmatic" approach to achieving equality, one that eschews the task of theorising and emphasises instead the promulgation and

implementation of concrete policies and structures. The second factor, as we have seen, is that the embodied performances of much of the British left, along with the affective responses that they elicit, tend to reflect and reproduce traditional gendered scripts, even if more women are doing the performing. In this way, the furtherance of the feministisation of the British left depends not only on a more sustained and rigorous intellectual/conceptual engagement with both feminist and left ideas, and their fundamental points of overlap, but also on the creation of more imaginative, less masculinist ways of doing politics. In sum, while the desire and will for change is there, the intellectual/cultural resources seem to be less so.

The final empirical point that we want to make concerns the context and temporal specificity of our findings. As we have said, from a diachronic perspective, we do detect a slow burning, if uneven and halting, transformation of the left towards a more feminist friendly way of enacting politics, a process that is, of course, reversible. When looking, synchronically, across the panoply of individual left sites, however, generalisations are harder to make. In the main, although it is important to acknowledge the efforts made by Left Unity and the People's Assembly, we were more impressed by the ways in which Momentum activists self-consciously, explicitly and passionately sought to tackle gender and race as obstacles to the pluralisation and democratisation of their left politics. Whether they are able to complement these efforts with a more sustained intellectual engagement with feminist, intersectional insights and find alternative ways of doing politics will remain an open question for some, as it is still early days.

Turning to our primary aim, we have sought to develop an analytical framework through which to map the feministisation (or otherwise) of instances of left-wing politics. While our approach has been mainly reconstructive – i.e. aiming to constructively build on, rather than debunk, existing approaches – our analysis might nonetheless yield lessons for some of the literatures we are engaging with. So while the socialist feminist theoretical literature is correct to point to the epistemological challenge that feminism poses to the left and the “feminisation” literature is certainly on the right track when they argue that the politics of presence (i.e. descriptive and substantive representation) is important, our research suggests that these benchmarks alone cannot capture the complex, polyvalent process of feministisation. To ignore the visceral and aesthetic features of a collectively enacted politics and the feelings that are produced in this turbulent context is to miss a crucial part of the story.

Last but not least, as left feminist researchers we would like to end by sounding a cautionary note with respect to the current state of the British left. The positive shifts described above are partial, fragmented, and vulnerable to being reversed. This is due, in part, to the broader post-Brexit referendum environment in which racist and misogynist tendencies in British politics and wider society seem to feel emboldened. But there is a further danger: that, in an attempt to respond to the challenges of post-Brexit Britain, the left will abandon feminism and anti-racism in the name of a broader rejection of “identity politics”, hopeful that such a move will free the left to “reconnect” with white working class voters. This tendency to bracket off feminism, anti-racism and queer/LGBT politics (Goodfellow, 2016) as a form of identity politics (as opposed to class politics) and then to assume that it poses a distraction to the main task at hand is perhaps one of the biggest threats to the continued “feministisation” of the left. Finding ways of challenging these internal and external countervailing tendencies is crucial if the partial moves towards a more feminist left are to become fully entrenched.

Notes

¹ Whilst we did interview a small number of activists based in Scotland, the majority of our interviewees were based in England. Thus, our empirical claims refer overwhelmingly to the English context, rather than the wider UK. This is significant given the highly divergent trajectories of the English and Scottish lefts since the 2014 independence referendum.

² Grime4Corbyn is a pro-Jeremy Corbyn movement consisting of artists and fans of grime, a musical genre and subculture originating from south and east London which combines elements of hip-hop, dancehall and garage (see Charles, 2017). Justice for Grenfell is a movement campaigning for the victims of the June 2017 fire in Grenfell Tower, a tower block in central London in which 70 people died.

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