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INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of *Nottingham French Studies* began life as a May 2021 workshop on the theme of *Postfeminism à la française*, organized by me (Diana Holmes) in my role as Honorary Professor (2019–21) at the University of Nottingham's School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies, and held online due to the restrictions imposed by Covid. At this well-attended event (ease of attendance being perhaps the only advantage of the online format brought into widespread use by the pandemic), invited speakers, whose articles now appear here, discussed the concept of postfeminism, hitherto largely developed in relation to Anglophone cultures, and its usefulness as a lens through which to view contemporary gender relations and their cultural representation in France. The aim was to explore the meanings of 'postfeminism', the relevance of the concept for feminism in the current moment and its pertinence for the study of contemporary French culture. The papers elicited many questions and much discussion, which we hope to have reflected in the further developed, written version of the live event presented here.

'Postfeminism' may seem at first sight a misleading term, for if we read the 'post' in its purely temporal sense then the implication is that feminism has now done its work and can be relegated to history. Even a cursory look at statistical evidence on social and economic inequality, and on sexual violence, demonstrates that this is far from the case,[1] and the recent international resurgence of feminist activism confirms, cheeringly, that feminism as a political movement is still very much alive. However, the prefix 'post' may also be read not as situating feminism in the past, but as referring to the situation of women in a society altered by the first and second waves of feminism yet still far from equal: as with 'postmodernism', the 'post' can suggest both continuity and a 'process of ongoing transformation'.[2] It is in this sense that feminist cultural theorists[3] have made of postfeminism a useful and relevant concept to capture the ways in which the ideological climate, with all its material causes and consequences, has changed for women over the closing decades of the twentieth century and the opening decades of the twenty-first, in ways that often reinforce rather than reduce sexual inequality. In our consideration of postfeminism here we will also be attentive to feminist responses to these changes in the form of new, creative forms of resistance.

The concept of postfeminism casts light on the way in which many of the gains of the feminist movement have been insidiously co-opted to serve the ends of a neoliberal political economy that remains essentially patriarchal. Neoliberalism refers to the political ideology that promotes free-market capitalism and deregulation, favouring the retraction of state spending on public services and welfare, working through strategies of privatization, globalization and the commercialization of everyday life to define citizens essentially as consumers and privilege the market as the sole engine of social progress. It is the dominant system of belief and practice in the global North, though inflected by national differences and the relative strength of left-wing opposition to its values. Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, captured an important aspect of neoliberal philosophy in her famous declaration that there is no such thing as society[4] – for neoliberalism denies the existence of structural inequalities and lays the blame for poverty and most forms of suffering on individual failure to take responsibility for one's fate, just as it casts the successes of those favoured by class, ethnicity, wealth and sex as personal achievements. As one prominent critic of this worldview put it: 'In a world governed by competition, those who fall behind become defined and self-defined as losers.'[5] And theorists of postfeminism define women as among the primary losers of the neoliberal system.

Neoliberalism can be seen as hostile to feminism in a number of senses, because it is intricately intertwined with patriarchy, the system of structural inequality between men and women that takes different forms over time and through interaction with class, ethnicity and local cultures, but remains embedded in most societies. The interconnections between neoliberalism and patriarchy are central to theories of postfeminism, and evident in a number of aspects of everyday life in Western societies. First, despite women's increased participation in political and economic life, governments and businesses are still very largely led by men and the minority of women who rise to senior roles often find themselves the target of misogynistic hostility. Second, the market economy depends on the unpaid and underpaid labour of the most vulnerable people, of whom a majority are women. Third, the consumer economy is massively invested in the beauty industry, still mainly directed at women, and also in the nuclear family with women as the principal target market for domestic and child-related products.

Whilst normative models of femininity have historically been shaped to serve the needs of the economy and of patriarchy, as feminist scholarship has powerfully shown, these models also change in accordance with specific economic and political conditions. Global capitalism has a breath-taking capacity to commodify and marketize, and thus defuse, anything that threatens the market system including movements that oppose it. The traditional model of womanhood to which women were supposed to aspire until the late twentieth century was virginal before marriage, then focused on domesticity and family, with education and employment as mere secondary, preparatory elements of life.[6] However the model of femininity that both labour and consumer markets now demand is one of adaptable professionalism and willing membership of a flexible workforce, alongside a scarcely reduced primary responsibility for the reproductive and caring dimension of life, and that extreme preoccupation with bodily aesthetics that leads to maximum consumption and maintains the primacy of a surveillant, implicitly male gaze. Various writers have pinpointed the phenomenon of what Anita Harris neatly labelled the 'Can-Do Girl':[7] the ideal postfeminist woman is young, professionally successful, sexy and at least in her shiny, public manifestation on social media and in real-life interactions, she is confident. Feminism's achievement of some important elements of equality are incorporated into this image: choice, agency, sexual freedom. And the ideal woman also aspires ultimately to winning the love of a man and founding a family, aspirations that appeal to fundamental human desires for love, identity, security, the opportunity to care, but also channel these in particular, market-friendly directions. To summarize: postfeminism refers to the reshaping of normative models of femininity to suit neoliberal socio-economic arrangements, and to deactivate oppositional feminism by recasting it in individualist, competitive terms. Rosalind Gill and her co-authors refer to postfeminism's 'evisceration of feminism of its emancipatory potential'[8].

However, the 'post' in postfeminism can also be read more optimistically, not simply as mourning the appropriation of feminist goals by feminism's enemies, but as recognizing the ongoing and necessary change in any political movement's thinking and tactics. Postfeminism can also refer to the recasting of feminist objectives of equality, social and sexual freedom, liberation for both sexes from rigid and often cramping models of gender – their recasting, that is, in the light of a changed *conjoncture* or set of conditions, at both global and local levels. In this sense, the term can be used to evoke what is also called 'fourth-wave feminism', the contemporary iteration of the women's movement that builds on previous 'waves' with renewed urgency, a sharp attention to sexual violence and intersectionality, and the twenty-first-century resources (as well as dangers) of the internet and social media.[9]

Our concern in this volume, as in the workshop on which it is based, is with postfeminism *à la française*: the aim is to look at how a phenomenon that has global reach plays out specifically in France, in a contemporary era characterized, since the economic crash of 2008, by some loss of faith in globalized capitalism, by increased inequality and insecurity, and by evidence on the political right of a nostalgic nationalism and traditionalism. In France as elsewhere, a resurgence of feminism has been met by a backlash – sometimes subtle, sometimes brutally explicit - against women's emancipation. Three elements stand out as especially relevant to our theme and as particular to France and to what may be termed 'global French' culture.

In the first place, compared to Britain (for example), France maintains a respect for the economic and social role of the state that conflicts with the dominance of the market economy. The hegemony of the neoliberal model is arguably more contested in France than elsewhere. In the cultural sphere this converges with the historically grounded centrality of culture to French identity (literature, the arts, cinema) to produce for example the defence of national, Francophone cultural forms against the global dominance of American popular culture.[10] A second particularity of France is that the famous universalism of the one and indivisible Republic leads to a reluctance to recognize how policies and practices may have specific impacts on categories of citizen, for example on women and on ethnic minorities. Arguably the universalism that is woven into the language and values of the French Republic has worked against intersectionality within feminism itself, with, for example, many sincere feminists adopting the *anti-foulard* stance of the government based on a universalist vision of the free female subject that denies the mediation of sex oppression by class and race (or racism).

The third element of French specificity in relation to postfeminism is somewhat less tangible, but significant nonetheless. It is this: whilst the definition of the two sexes as intrinsically distinct in nature, and the characterization of women essentially in terms of their aesthetic and erotic appeal for men are by no means particular to France, they do seem to be particularly strong in French culture. Sexual difference – that between men and women – is quite widely viewed as foundational of difference itself, as fundamental to what makes life interesting and pleasurable. Feminism in France – more than in other cultures – has been met by anxiety about the loss of seductive interplay between the sexes, and a reaffirmation of men's right to seduce, and women's pleasure in being seduced, that is less evident elsewhere. In the words of the (in)famous anti-#MeToo letter to *Le Monde* signed by a hundred-strong collective of French women, many of them famous, 'la liberté d'importuner' is considered by many as 'indispensable à la liberté sexuelle'.[11] The far-right candidate for the 2022 presidential election, Éric Zemmour, gained considerable publicity and 7.1% of first-round votes with his polemical anti-feminist stance that brought together nationalist hostility to what are perceived as 'Anglo-Saxon' notions of sexual equality, with a nostalgic regret for an era of unabashed male supremacy when women 'knew their place'. Zemmour amplifies a recurrent theme in French culture when he expresses the fear that 'le féminisme c'est l'indifféranciation', and warns that women's pretensions to equality and the resulting 'abdication des hommes blancs du XXe siècle qui ont mis à terre leur sceptre patriarcal' are destroying 'cet équilibre subtil entre hommes et femmes, entre virilité dominante et féminité influente' that (he claims) both sexes found fulfilling.[12] For Zemmour, men accused of sexual assault (a category that includes himself) are only behaving in accordance with their true masculine nature: 'Il y a de la violence dans le rapport sexuel entre homme et femme. C'est une violence civilisée, évidemment. [L'homme doit être] un prédateur sexuel civilisé.'[13] Whilst Zemmour's explicit defence of male supremacy has been strongly challenged by much of the media as well as by feminist groups, it has been repeatedly articulated in public fora (political speeches, books, televised interviews) and been accepted into public discourse in part because it echoes an insistence on the primacy of sexual difference that is already familiar in French culture, resonating too with French critiques of 'Anglo-Saxon' neoliberalism as destructive of a more rooted, traditional and wholesome French way of life.[14] In terms of sex and gender relations, whilst it would be an exaggeration to claim an *exception française*, it certainly seems accurate to speak of an *accentuation française*.

In France as elsewhere, images of idealized feminine identities, imperatives to appear, behave and indeed *feel* in certain ways (for neoliberalism, as Rosalind Gill writes, 'insinuates itself into the nooks and crannies of everyday life'[15]) are everywhere: postfeminist culture is part of a high-tech world where the ubiquity of screens and social media make the performance of identity, including gendered identity, a constant preoccupation. The implication that it is the individual's responsibility to live up to the empowered, self-optimizing, stylish yet caring ideal of postfeminist womanhood is everywhere, perhaps most stridently in the multi-media messages of advertising[16] but also throughout the media and transactions that make up everyday life – and it is powerful. It is nonetheless salutary to resist casting the pervasive, potent culture of neoliberal postfeminism as omnipotent, for as the articles below also reveal, post-second-wave feminism can be seen more positively as a new phase of feminism itself, with real political possibilities in its exhortation to call out and contest all forms of sexual violence, both physical and symbolic, its searching interrogation of the concept of consent, its emphasis on intersectionality, its open embrace of female sexuality and re-interpretation of practices traditionally associated with femininity (fashion and beauty, the culture of romance) – all of these present in second-wave feminism,[17] but amplified in contemporary movements. This cultural landscape, with all its contradictions, is represented and explored in different aspects of contemporary French culture in the articles collected here.

We open with Mary Harrod's analysis of contemporary French takes on the predominantly Anglo-American film genre of the romantic comedy, or rom-com. Surveying French onscreen romances of the 2010s, Harrod tracks the tension in popular postfeminist culture between, on the one hand, the need to acknowledge women's significant role in the workplace and 'liberated' sense of their own rights and agency, and on the other the requirement, both economic and nostalgic, to perpetuate women's domestic, reproductive and subordinate role. In her study of two recent films in the mode of the 'time travel fantasy romance', Harrod identifies the pleasurable reconciliation of these contradictory aims, and pinpoints too how the fantasized but temporally distanced re-imagining of a world of traditional gender roles also works to defend French specificity against the globalized, US-dominated culture of the present day, couching anxiety about national identity in terms of the politics of gender.

The #MeToo iteration of international feminism has shone a revealing light on the scale of male violence against women, in France as elsewhere. Pauline Delage examines how the French State has responded to evidence of this phenomenon – further exacerbated by the conditions imposed by the Covid pandemic – with strategies designed to counter and sanction domestic violence. However, she finds that State policies are deeply embedded in the neoliberal market, favouring outsourcing, competitive bidding for contracts and public/private partnerships over feminist, charitable and fully public-funded strategies. In line with the overall stance of neoliberal ideology, this State reliance on the private sector means that structural inequalities go ignored in State responses to the widespread phenomenon of domestic violence.

Contemporary #Balancetonporc feminism has also led to highly public denunciations of a culture that enabled the abuse of very young girls – and in some cases boys – in the name of sexual freedom and a romantic view of transgressive sexuality as the rightful prerogative of the (male) creative artist. Douglas Morrey examines in particular Vanessa Springora's indictment of the much-lauded author Gabriel Matzneff, who seduced her in her early teenage years, in her bestselling book *Le Consentement*. Morrey asks to what extent Springora's treatment of the concept of consent endorses the postfeminist tendency to celebrate female sexual agency whilst ignoring the issue of power in determining what constitutes consent. Morrey's article highlights too that strand of French literary culture that glorifies even the most exploitative sexual behaviour provided this is then transmuted into literary form – but the reception of Springora's book, and of other similarly accusatory memoirs, indicates that such attitudes are now subject to widespread challenge.

Jasmine Cooper turns to one of the most high-profile of contemporary French women authors, Leïla Slimani, and adopts an intersectional perspective to examine how Slimani's international bestseller *Chanson douce* effectively foregrounds the roles of gender and class in the predicaments of postfeminist women, but largely occludes the role of race. This, she finds, echoes and endorses the refusal of French Republican universalism to see and name the social effects of racialized difference, and the implicit valorization of whiteness in postfeminist culture's dominant ideal of womanhood.

Polly Galis explores the controversial question of how a feminism that values women's sexual freedom should view the selling of sex through prostitution and pornography. To address this question, she studies recent manifestoes and other writings produced by sex workers themselves with the aim of revising feminism from a sex-positive perspective. Poised between a feminism that builds on and amplifies second wave claims for women's right to define and freely explore their sexuality, and neoliberal postfeminism's tendency to ignore the imbalance of power that makes sexual agency problematic, sex workers' interrogation of feminist attitudes to work in the sex industry is challenging and – Galis argues – potentially productive.

Finally, I analyse three contemporary novels by women writers, each situated differently in the high/low hierarchy of the literary market, from popular chick-lit to postmodern autofiction, but each addressing quite explicitly the situation of women in a postfeminist climate. Fictional narratives provide a site for the recognition and interrogation of the conditions of contemporary life, and my article studies how each of these stories depicts the postfeminist culture that shapes their narratives, asking to what extent each elucidates or challenges the particular situation of women in present-day France – in terms of their address to readers, characterization, and the shape and resolution of each narrative arc.

Feminism, then, has regained visibility and even a degree of cultural capital in France as across – at least – the global North. Feminist activism has cast a spotlight on the sexual violence and coercion glamourized and to some extent concealed by a culture that regards desire and seduction as the primary mode of relationship between the sexes, and licenses transgressive sexual behaviour as inseparable from virile creativity in the case of the artist or writer. The #MeToo/#Balancetonporc movement has led to the establishment of new policies to counter domestic and other forms of sexual violence, and to the renewed prominence of feminist themes and debates in media and popular culture. In turn this has triggered a backlash in the form of explicitly pro-patriarchal, anti-equality discourses (most publicly voiced by Éric Zemmour) that converge with a nostalgic defence of French national specificity against the perceived dominance of Anglo-American modernity. More insidiously, the central claims of feminism for women's equality and agency have been neatly co-opted and commodified to recast the ideal female subject as a compliant worker, consumer and carer: self-disciplined, sexy, accepting responsibility for her own successful performance of femininity rather than questioning the structural inequalities that underpin neoliberal society. Postfeminism proves an illuminating concept for the analysis of gender relations in the specific time and place of contemporary France, both in its negative sense of a dangerously effective depoliticization of feminism itself, and in its more optimistic meaning as a revitalized, pervasive militancy that resists neoliberalism's co-option of feminist values and opens up the very notion of what 'liberation' might mean.

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[1] For statistics on inequalities between men and women in France see for example: <https://www.oxfamfrance.org/inegalites-femmes-hommes/inegalites-hommes-femmes-travail/>; <https://www.egalite-femmes-hommes.gouv.fr/les-inegalites-femmes-hommes/>; https://www.vie-publique.fr/en-bref/282556-egalite-femmes-hommes-un-sexisme-persistant-selon-le-hcefh [accessed 14 March 2022].

[2] Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 26.

[3] Among the key texts on postfeminism referenced in this volume are: Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009); Rosalind Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of

Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20:6 (2017), 606–26.

[4] Douglas Keay, 'Margaret Thatcher, Interview for "Woman's Own" ("No Such Thing as Society")', 31 October 1987, pp. 8–10. https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.

[5] George Monbiot, 'Neoliberalism – The Ideology at the Root of all our Problems', *The Guardian*, 15 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot> [accessed 17 March 2022].

[6] Second-wave feminism named and challenged this normative ideal, as some of French feminism's pithy slogans capture well: 'Prolétaires de tous les pays, qui lave vos chaussettes?'; 'Mariage piège à cons'.

[7] In Harris, *Future Girl*, p.16 and passim.

[8] Sarah Barnet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg, 'Postfeminism, Popular Feminism and Neoliberal Feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in Conversation', *Feminist Theory*, 21:1 (2020), 3–24 (p. 15).

[9] See Nicola Rivers, *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[10] France has a long history of defending national cultural industries against the global influence of American film and television in particular: see for example Sarah Walkley, *Cultural Diversity in the French Film Industry: Defending the Cultural Exception in a Digital Age* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018). This extends to the defence of a wider ideological *exception culturelle*, for example with France's Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, establishing in October 2021 the Laboratoire de la République' 'pour lutter contre le "wokisme"'; see <https://www.lelaboratoiredelarepublique.fr/> [accessed April 29 2022].

[11] Collectif de 100 femmes, 'Nous défendons une liberté d'importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle', *Le Monde*, 9 January 2018, <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html> [accessed 23 March 2022].

[12] Éric Zemmour, *Le Premier Sexe* (Paris: Denoël, 2006).

[13] Éric Zemmour interviewed on RTS (Radio Télévision Suisse), 29 September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqZTCTt1DpA&t=280s> [accessed 5 April 2022].

[14] The distinction between sex (male/female) and gender (masculinity/femininity, or the socially constructed meanings of sex) is made harder to articulate in French because only one term exists for both: masculin/féminin. On French critiques of neoliberalism, particularly in relation to gender, see Jeremy Lane, '"Come, you spirits… unsex me!" Representations of the Female Executive in Recent French Film & Fiction', in *Modern & Contemporary France*, 23:4 (2015), 511–28.

[15] Gill, 'The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism', p. 608. Gill is quoting Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[16] The organization *Résistance à l'agression publicitaire* published a thoroughly researched study in January 2021 that demonstrated the systematic sexualization of women in French advertising, and the ubiquity of images of white, slim, youthful women who effortlessly combine maternal and domestic responsibilities with smiling, erotically inviting charm. <https://reporterre.net/IMG/pdf/rapport-le-sexisme-dans-la-publicite_-franc_aise-2021-01-08-md.pdf> [accessed 7 April 2022].

[17] See *Making Waves: French Feminisms and their Legacies 1975–2015*, ed. by Margaret Atack, Alison S. Fell, Diana Holmes and Imogen Long (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019) for the continuities between second-wave and post-#MeToo feminism in France.