

The F-Word

Are We All Top Girls, or Do We Still Need Feminism?

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Are you a feminist? Am I a feminist? For almost fifteen years now, feminism has been a red hot potato. Feminism has become a negative buzzword, the F-word. Only a few women and men would today call themselves feminists. Feminism has been ‘maligned or even hated, defamed and museumified’,¹ the great majority are ‘uninformed or have extreme reservations’,² or ‘people become feminists, so it is thought, only out of necessity or a sense of frustration’³.

Feminism is considered a historical movement that has played its part. Women and men alike believe that they can defend themselves against gender stereotypes. Feminism: that’s a subject for Islamic societies, or so the logic goes. For legal equality has already been achieved on several levels in our latitudes:⁴ gender specific limitations on freedom have been legally abolished, women are no longer considered a mere sex object, have a right to waged labour, and can decide for themselves when they want to become a mother. Women can, want, and need to shape their own lives. It seems as if feminist demands have been met by the realities of equal rights. Seats of political power, like the IMF, are being led by a woman for the first time, Switzerland has three Federal Councillors and Germany has a female chancellor. Lady Gaga is the spearhead of a sexually-self confident generation of young women, and popular television series, such as *Lindenstraße* or *The L-Word*, in which the stigma of homosexuality is weakened, now seem almost historic. The entertainment potential of gender issues in the mainstream and popular culture, however, stands alongside the real everyday antipathy and discrimination. Why is it necessary for European female politicians to renew the demand for a quota in top management positions in 2011? Why do the statistics repeatedly show the relationship of the number of female students to female professors as a mountain to valley? Why is the average gender pay gap⁵ across Europe still 21.6%? Why do women continue to give up their professions or work part time when they have children? Why are single women of retirement age in danger of poverty? Why do biologicistic explanations for gender-based behaviour repeatedly meet with popularity? Why do men who take extended parental leave or refuse to accept the role as family provider meet with social scorn? Why do male role models in particular seem to be so without alternatives?

Our short-term historical memory, which allows us to suppress all these issues, can on the one hand be linked to the self-evident way in which we take advantage of the achievements of feminism. Correctives in terms of legal rights and freedoms have made possible a pluralisation of female roles and gender identities. At the same time, neo-liberal policies have emphasized the projection of our own destiny as an individual, purely private responsibility, and thus the rejection of the notion of any structural disadvantages as a woman. ‘At all costs, nobody wants to be considered part of a victim group. The neo-liberal ideology that there are no structural disadvantages, but just individual failure, that is, there are no longer any victims, but only losers who are themselves to blame, has shaped our own self-image without our noticing’, as film scholar Gertrud Koch analyses.⁶ Everything is under control: we women are the ones making our own life decisions. This is the coaching provided by the great majority of women’s magazines. In the recent preface to a special edition of *Texte zur Kunst* on the subject of feminism, the editors critically sum up: ‘The mood has never been more “post-feminist” or “post-gender” than today.’⁷

These statements follow the analysis of the British cultural sociologist Angela McRobbie in her study *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*: capitalism sells us a pseudo-feminism in

1 See Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009).

2 Sonja Eismann (ed.), *Hot Topic: Popfeminismus heute* (Mainz: Ventil Verlag, 2007), 10.

3 Michèle Roten, *Frau sein* (Basel: Echtzeit Verlag, 2011), 4.

4 I’m referring to Western European societies with specific national characteristics.

5 See for example https://www.destatis.de/DE/PresseService/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2012/03/PD12_101_621.html.

6 Gertrud Koch, ‘Feminismus nach der Identitätspolitik’, *Texte zur Kunst: Feminismus*, 84 (2011), 69.

7 Sabeth Buchmann, Isabelle Graw, and Juliane Rebentisch, ‘Preface’, trans. Karl Hoffmann, *Texte zur Kunst: Feminismus*, 84 (2011), 4.

which personal freedom, mobilisation, and flexibility seem to be promoted to our own advantage, and only ambition, competition, a drive to achieve, and luck will guarantee success in life. Society with its inherent structures and rewards is negated, and can 'retraditionalise' by way of the negation of a system of hegemonic masculinity.⁸ In her examples, McRobbie looks at a generation of younger women who are convinced that they have no need of feminism. But McRobbie shows that they still move within a narrow definitional frame of femininity and beauty. Within this atmosphere, the provocative book *Die Feigheit der Frauen* (The Cowardice of Women) by journalist Bascha Mika strikes a nerve. She charges women with being cowardly, cushy, mousy, and of subordinating themselves of their own accord, in the end cheating themselves.⁹ So the battle lines are drawn once again: What should, could, or will women should and want?

Nothing better could happen to feminism than becoming something to talk about once again. And not just within the academic framework, where feminism has indeed been continuously developed in theoretical and analytical terms, but in a way that rarely achieves social publicity. The division between the academy and real life experience promotes the mistrust of feminism as an emancipatory project for those not interested in demonizing a gender, but rather in the culturally and politically attentive interrogation of rigid gender roles and hegemonic heterosexual gender identities in places where we no longer suspect them, because gender relations remain power relations. Nobody wants to be constantly reduced to a gender identity or to judge everything according on that basis. And this is precisely the goal of a feminist politics: the abolition of gender stereotypes linked to expectations and limitations. It is necessary to develop an awareness of the category of gender, for without it social patterns and ascriptions and conceptual boxes like those biological gender, but also ethnicity, religion, or class cannot be decoded and deconstructed.

So what should a modern feminism accomplish, and above all how can it represent itself? In the English-speaking West, there has been a lively critical engagement with the media and entertainment industry, often carried out by people who are still quite young. For example, the American media critic Anita Sarkeesian, who in *Feminist Frequency*¹⁰ offers a refreshing view of the codes and kings of American popular culture: from the *Bechdel Test*¹¹, which evaluates feature films according to the presence of female characters and to analyses of music videos, TV series, or even toys. This younger generation decodes global media and popular culture because they have grown up as part of its mass audience and the sense of 'anything goes'. In her reader *Hot Topic: Popfeminismus heute* and as co-founder of *Missy Magazin*, German cultural theorist Sonja Eismann focuses on feminist subjects in (pop) culture and society. On the field of tension between popular culture and feminism, she writes: 'While on the one hand the feminist movement, still seen with mistrust or hate, due to constantly reanimated associations of "unattractiveness" or "griminess" seems like the last bastion of unmarketability, on the other hand the "cool" codes of feminists in popular culture, emptied of all content, can be fed to the market with no difficulties whatsoever.'¹² Eismann's critique rings similar to Angela McRobbie's: capitalism and neo-liberalism trump with the fulfilment of promises of equality and gender pluralisation, but behind the glamour curtain and the stairway to success manifest mechanisms of distribution are hidden. So it is worth taking both a look backwards and look forwards. What can we learn from the feminism of the 1970s? Have it been judged unfairly and forgotten? What might successful strategies for decoding neo-liberal pseudo truths today look like? What are adequate responses to the predicted re-traditionalisation of hegemonic gender relations? Are cultural artistic formats effective languages for a critical approach to a market logic that affirms difference?

8 See Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 74pp.

9 See Bascha Mika, *Die Feigheit der Frauen: Rollenfallen und Geiselnalität. Eine Streitschrift wider den Selbstbetrug* (Munich: Goldmann, 2011).

10 'Conversations with Pop Culture: Feminist Analysis of Race, Gender, Class, Sexuality and Privilege in the Media', <http://www.feministfrequency.com>.

11 The so-called Bechdel-Test, often referred to in a comic way, comes from Alison Bechdel's queer comic *Dykes to Watch Out For* (begun in 1983). The Bechdel-Test is used in American blogs also to study racist representations in entertainment.

12 Sonja Eismann (ed.), *Hot Topic*, 9.