

Introduction: What does it mean to be Feminist today?

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What does it mean to be feminist today? This is not a simple question given that the current climate of relativism seems to have deprived feminism of a coherent political position. To be clear, there are many *feminisms* and many *feminists* – the question here is, what do they all hold in common apart from the name? The event of feminism takes different forms in different contexts, institutions and cultures. Moreover, despite this and particularly in the university, discourses of gender politics have increasingly eclipsed or possibly colonised discussions of feminism. Here feminism has become a question and praxis grappling with its historicisation and it seems to us that feminism today is struggling with a nuanced problem which permeates its very discourse: how to stage a subjectivity which is distinctly *feminist*? It is in response to this question that this issue of *Continental Thought and Theory* arose with the intention of providing a space where various possibilities can be articulated and engaged.

All too often feminism seems to appear to variously foreground, retreat or convolute within a larger gender politics that is arguably still entangled within postmodern relativism. We consider it crucial to restate that the importance of feminism is its emphasis on ‘life’ as primarily a material question. For instance, questions concerning feminist scholars today focus on economic struggles, class, entrapment within conduits of historicisation, foregrounding women’s experiences and how the experiences of minority and marginalised groups are documented, understood and so on. For feminism has its roots as an emancipatory social movement and a radical history of

demand (notwithstanding its sometimes conservative foundations, such as the temperance movement). At the same time and despite its pleas within the pluralist identity politics of the twenty-first century, we still struggle to *know* feminism.

Given its current enigmatic character, what could be the object of feminism today? Or provactively, but seriously, does it have an object at all that is distinctive from the ensemble of social relations? From our ideological-political position in the twenty-first century it is increasingly clear that feminism as truth is never finally achieved but must always be fought for anew and worked towards in every generation. Likewise, in positioning ourselves at the interface of diverse disciplines, we have a chance to elucidate, even in a small way, a feminism which cannot be constrained or fully captured. From here we can push further: *what does feminism want* or more simply, *what does feminism want to stand in the name of?*

Žižek raises a provocation in his recent commentary on the French elections, more specifically, Le Pen:¹

As Alain Badiou pointed out, in today's ideological universe, men are ludic adolescent outlaws, while women appear as hard, mature, serious, legal and punitive. Women today are not called by the ruling ideology to be subordinated, they are called - solicited, expected - to be judges, administrators, ministers, CEOs, teachers, policewomen and soldiers. A paradigmatic scene occurring daily in our security institutions is that of a feminine teacher/judge/psychologist taking care of an immature asocial young male delinquent. A new figure of femininity is thus arising: a cold competitive agent of power, seductive and manipulative, attesting to the paradox that "in the conditions of capitalism women can do better than men" (Badiou). This, of course, in no way makes women suspicious as agents of capitalism; it merely signals that contemporary capitalism invented its own ideal image of woman who stands for cold administrative power with a human face.

What are effects if this stands in as one of the contemporary figures of feminism today? If so, this is very reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher, Hilary Clinton, Angela Merkel and Helen Clark, all neo-liberal versions of capitalism where the strong woman succeeding in politics or business is regarded as a form of feminist icon. Because of this capturing of feminism too often, even in the university, women don't know what to make of feminism and increasingly may declare themselves post-feminist or non-feminist, as if the event of feminism has been accomplished.

The contributors to this issue grapple with two questions: *what kind of feminism is the predominant one?* and *what does feminism want?* The result is that this issue of *Continental Thought and Theory* considers the difference, the gap between what feminism is, what it is taken to be and what it could be. The contributors consider what feminism responds to, what it ought to respond to and how it can be structured to best respond to the crises of our times. We note that the word *feminist* has always had, for differing reasons, the potential to elicit an effect. But what this effect entails involves the broader question whereby feminism is a signifier but we are unsure what to do with it. Perhaps we can start by questioning the promise of meaning, more precisely of what it means to be a woman or a man, and instead attend to absence of meaning as a theoretical problem to be grappled with. As Darian Leader rightly says, “[b]eing a woman is thus hardly a simple operation. In fact, the psychoanalytic argument might even seem to imply that one can only ‘be’ a woman in the eyes of someone else”.²

Thus, it is not easy or simple being a person in the world.³ Moreover, attempts to mitigate traditional constructs of femininity have been inundated with modernised archetypal images of the ideal woman which foreground gender politics. Here feminism can respond by returning to its praxis roots: being an agitator, a provocateur and more importantly, an uncomfortable problem that simply won’t go away. Let us consider also that we do not fully know feminism, that maybe we never did, that we have moments where we are confounded by the very idea of it both as a theoretical question and as praxis. What if feminism, at its most effective, might be an act and an event yet to come? This issue hopes to contribute to the ongoing debates and discussion about what it can mean to be feminist by considering what are the political ramifications of feminism, which we simply cannot ignore.

1 Slavoj Žižek, Don’t Believe the Liberals – There is no Real Choice between Le Pen and Macron, Independent. Accessed from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/french-elections-marine-le-pen-emmanuel-macron-no-real-choice-a7714911.html> 2017, unpaginated

2 Darian Leader, *Why Do Women Write More Letters Than They Post?* (London: Faber and Faber 1996) 17.

3 Here we refer to Jacqueline Rose’s article, “Donald Trump’s victory is a disaster for modern masculinity”, *The Guardian* 16 November, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/15/trump-disaster-modern-masculinity-sexual-nostalgian->