

Subira
Wahogo
& Ron
Roberts

Fourth Wave Feminism: Protests and prospects

This article explores the possibilities and prospects offered by the fourth wave of feminist action and considers its relevance as a vehicle for resistance against gender injustice and the iniquities proffered by the mental health system.

Key words: fourth wave feminism, oppression, social justice activist

As highlighted by the hugely popular Slutwalks, that have been taking place all over the world recently, feminism is again on the rise. Mere reference to the 'f' word can provoke a variety of reactions, predominant amongst them invocations of worn out assumptions and overused stereotypes. The feminism we discuss in this article is newer than the old clichés of bra burners or man-haters, and often comes under the rubric of Fourth Wave Feminism. This is to be distinguished from the First Wave, which involved the struggle for female suffrage, the Second Wave which focused on reproductive rights, and issues of equality in the workplace and family, and the Third Wave which sought to elaborate and rewrite the cognitive dimensions of female empowerment - producing such neologisms such as 'riot girl' and 'girl power', alongside wide ranging challenges to gender stereotypes and rejection of the feminine ideal. Feminism in its most recent wave comprises the sisterhood of online bloggers and internet communities, a sign that a new generation of activists is ready to take up the mantle of protest and adapt the struggle for the emancipation of women to the heady technological times in which we live. So what has this fourth wave got to offer? Fourth wave feminism is arguably the most inclusive form of the struggle for female emancipation to date. The movement is closely interlinked with social justice activism which takes as a given the proposition that all forms of systematic oppression are connected. Thus, the fight to end sexism runs hand in hand with the struggle to end racism, classism, disablism, body shaming, heterosexism and ageism to name but a few. For many feminists

Subira Wahogo has been a student at Henley College, and a Deputy Member of Youth Parliament (DMYP for Wokingham). She is now an undergraduate student at Oxford Brookes University. Ron Roberts works at Kingston University. He is the author of *Just War: Psychology & terrorism* and *Real to Reel: Psychiatry at the cinema* both published by PCCS Books. Email: r.a.roberts@kingston.ac.uk

© Wahogo & Roberts 1471-7646/12/04216-6

the unity of the struggle against oppression is a core belief; they would thus happily describe themselves as social justice activists. Some social justice activists however have openly rejected the label of feminist because of concerns over its past exclusivity and problems such as racism and classism within the movement. In this article we will explore the possibilities which this new form of feminist action offers and consider its relevance as a vehicle for resistance against the organized injustices of the mental health system.

Communication, organisation, protest

The new style of feminism we consider here, swimming as it is in the slipstream of communication technologies, is arguably opening up hitherto unknown spaces for inclusive and wide ranging communication between women from multiple diverse backgrounds, bringing the movement ever closer to social justice activism. It utilises forums, online articles, blogs, social networking websites and online petitions (the bombardment of which constitutes the recent phenomenon that is 'poll bombing'). This list is not exhaustive, highlighting just how important technology and the versatility of the Internet are to the current feminist movement. These varying forums for the movement provide ample opportunity for expression and communication, sparking off many a discussion and debate, bringing people together across diverse geographical and cultural spaces. These are simultaneously the lifeblood and the downfall of the movement. While debate facilitates the development of ideas and concepts and allows specific injustices and controversies to be highlighted and challenged, at the same time the limitless opportunities for debate regardless of level of expertise means that the divisive opinion which characterises the fledgling movement has yet to be effectively translated into coordinated and effective practical action. The prospects which the new communication technologies offer for organised protest have certainly been apparent in the tidal wave of resistance to corrupt and oppressive regimes which has swept through the Middle East. Unlike the previous incarnations of feminist protest, the nature of the 'Fourth Wave' renders complete anonymity possible. This brings with it both benefits and costs. The internet permits anonymity to be gained through unique user identities or even simulated personae. Through these, members of the cyber community can express almost anything without any obvious consequences following them back to their offline worlds and identities. This means that one can bare one's soul in relative safety – an opportunity which online purveyors of counselling and psychotherapy have also sought to exploit. Whereas cyber psychotherapy reinforces the status differentials between 'expert' and those who seek help, much of the online communication between fourth wave feminists has a decidedly more democratic feel to it. As many discussions and exchanges do not unfold in real time, more developed, prolonged and thoughtful debate between committed activists becomes possible. In addition it can be said to encourage turn taking, without the interference of the customary prosodic features that would be used in a face-to-face debate. For example, it is no longer the person who can speak the loudest or

interrupt the most who will be listened to; everyone gets an input. The fourth wave also arguably offers a more inclusive opportunity for younger women more at home with the new technologies to get their voices heard. The democratisation of discursive space in this way may be one of the reasons for the spectacular successes of social protest organised on the internet – the intelligence of many simply overwhelms the possibility of dominance by single self-appointed leaders. Not surprisingly media commentators have been reluctant to draw attention to this – no doubt in anticipation of their own demise as authoritative sources of information should the phenomenon get into full swing. Currently major media outlets are the principle sources of ‘news’ information, but this can only weaken as the internet continues to grow in both size and influence. Indeed the fourth wave contributes to the ongoing challenge to the very notion of what constitutes news, as information regarding events, and ideas is produced from the ground upwards unlike the top down corporate management of everyday news.

Mood and content

On the other side of the coin, the anonymity and lack of face to face contact of internet exchanges means that people can be ruder, more aggressive and generally more unpleasant without feeling as guilty and without fear of retribution. Freud could never have foreseen how technology could lift the lid on the repressed and give it such free rein! On the internet, one can thus quickly find a variety of public forums, including those associated with the mainstream press, where people willingly express opinions which would bring outright condemnation not to say disgust or ridicule were they to be voiced in a face to face meeting. One need only think of the plethora of moon landing deniers who regularly extol their musings and not least the supporters of indicted war criminals who crawl out of the woodwork when a suspect is shipped off to The Hague. Within the fourth wave feminist and social justice communities, as well as amongst those challenging them, aggressive hyperbole is not infrequent. Campaigners, activists, journalists, bloggers and other contributors may find themselves frustrated by anything from offensive comments uttered by attention craving celebrities to the introduction of regressive legal measures, taking in, en route, another online hipster being ‘ironically’ offensive as an attempt to be ‘edgy’, or the usual oppressive clichés trotted out in dreary unimaginative advertisements for the umpteenth time. Their response may be to pepper cyberspace with some choice swear words or expressions of unadulterated aggression – all in the hope of discharging their frustration. This however may have unintended consequences. Whatever its inherent limitations, the anonymous mode of internet debate and discussion, and the ensuing higher levels of aggression expressed that come with it, compared to offline interaction, can be seen as challenging this idea that marginalised groups have to be submissive. An inescapable reality unfolding in the 21st century is that the world is being redefined in cyberspace. The global organisation of protest is testimony to this. The internet may now be central, not just to the reorganisation

of macro-social and political space but also to the rewriting of behavioural scripts which underpin the micro-social world and simultaneously rob it of spontaneity and emotional depth. What is very evident currently is that a large number of people are very angry. The recent riots in London (not to mention those in Paris not so long ago) are testimony to this if nothing else. They are also an absolutely predictable consequence of a number of factors which are prevalent in Britain today ... extreme economic instability, declining political legitimacy of ruling elites, a culture of widespread corruption (politics, business, news media, police, academia) and selfishness. This selfishness has been encouraged by business and political leaders for the best part of three decades and is mirrored in some branches of academic theory (where it is 'explained' as an evolutionary adaptation). Added to this simmering brew there is the toxicity of widespread unemployment amongst young people, who are privy, not to opportunities for meaningful work, but the media's lugubrious obsession with mindless celebrity and ostentatious wealth. How people are supposed to deal with this is of course an issue studiously avoided in mainstream media as well as academic circles, where it remains the preferred mode of analysis to exemplify protest as psychological aberration. The online world is however one place where it is being addressed. Here the idea that the behaviour of the marginalised and disaffected sectors of society has nothing whatsoever to do with the values coming down from on high is recognised for what it is - frankly ridiculous!

Challenging 'mental health' in cyberspace

Anything expressed emotively, however factual or valid it may be, inevitably meets what has been referred to as the 'Tone Argument'. This is the idea that expressing anger, or indeed any form of 'negative' emotion, renders a person's argument invalid. This is perhaps the first place in which online protest comes 'face to face' with the stultifying norms of the mental health system. Anger, not least because it frequently speaks to power and injustice, is seized upon as a focus for pathologising discourse. With these 'derailers' around, one can be permitted only the freedom of resigned hopelessness or frustration - whether online or offline. Anything which seeks to escape the bounds of containable dissatisfaction risks being labelled as 'opposition defiant disorder'. The behavioural sciences have moved in a generation from Milgram's exhortations to protest and resist illegitimate authority to broad acceptance of such authority's moves to pathologise protest itself. Argument and dissent in the virtual world may meet the same fate as its counterpart beyond it - being similarly ignored, castigated or derailed - somehow tragically flawed because of its failure to submit to the demands of the culturally dominant calculus of emotional life in the deep freeze. This constitutes the front line for any online challenge to the psychiatric system a system which has perennially medicalised and pathologised females' responses to their oppression. One of the key challenges given to members of all liberation movements, and this is true of feminists in particular (because women and other oppressed groups are systematically denied access

to the power which comes with righteous anger) is to reclaim this right to anger. Always leapt upon, criticised and shouted down, it is decried precisely because it is imbued with power and threatens the status quo. While fourth wave feminism finds its feet, it is understandable that framing anger as a signpost to instability and unreliability may lead some people to avoid it, in an attempt to avoid stigma. What they do not realise though, is that those who comply in withdrawing or denying their anger are already engaging in debate on the oppressor's terms. The argument is already lost when the rules followed are set by one's opponents. Precisely because of the safety afforded by online anonymity, and because they are in the early stages of constructing new perspectives on their predicament, fourth wave feminists may be in a position to counter the anger myth more successfully than might be imagined. In order for the movement to progress, not only must the right to emotional reactions in general be decoupled from psychiatric language but that anger in particular must be demedicalised, depathologised and repoliticised. As the feminist punk rock band Bikini Kill said 'I'm so sorry if I'm alienating some of you, your whole f**king culture alienates me', and as some wise (but frustratingly unsourceable) soul on the internet said 'If you tread on someone's toes, and they tell you to get off, then get off their toes. Don't tell them to 'ask nicely'.'

Conclusion: from cyber space to social space – building bridges

As well as the intended wider effects of fourth wave feminism to challenge the socially constructed gendered world, being a part of this online movement can have profound effects on the individuals in it. These effects are of course not uniform, but can and do change the way in which people feel about themselves and the way they interact with the outside world. It is precisely because of this that the fourth wave has much to offer opponents and victims of the mental health system, and one hopes the future will see bridges built and strong alliances forged with mental health system survivors across a variety of existing social, cultural and national divides. As with any emancipatory community, the opportunities for positive movement will inevitably meet contradictory and regressive forces – to be met with varying degrees of resistance or resigned internalisation. An already politicised web community will be well placed to resist the usual overtures from Big Pharma to infect the psychiatric resistance movement. Employing a biological metaphor one may suppose that an emancipatory non-biological feminist input into the user movement could stimulate host immunity to reject the spread of infection. This growing feminism has momentum, pointing the way to a wider, more diverse and inclusive community. In the midst of the current social and political crises it is imperative that all avenues for resistance must be explored. The fourth wave is in its infancy but, in creating safety, strengthening marginalized people's voices, spreading empowerment and resistance across cultural divides while permitting new forms of organisation, education and activism, it may come to play an important role in building a better human future.