Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere

JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Socialist feminism and media studies.
An outdated theory or contemporary debate?

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Abstract

'You've come a long way, baby' may be the message to feminist media scholars today. Developments in recent decades such as the recently emerging fourth wave feminist movements, self-proclaimed post-feminist heroines within media texts, the 1990s 'girl power' imply concepts and theories from second and third wave feminism are outdated and passé. However, this chapter argues media studies needs and desire critiques, such as those offered by socialist feminism. Socialist feminism attempts to 'marry' Marxism and Feminism, and theoretically examines and challenges concepts such as patriarchy and capitalism, thus offering a challenge to the white, middle class, male dominated media industry. This enables theorists to confront the media texts, messages, and wider power imbalances the ideologies within the media reinforce (Couldry, 2000: 8). The chapter initially examines the origins and criticisms of early socialist feminism and then the more recent developments, such as the disregard for class in the 1980s and 1990s and problematic notion of essentialism. Drawing on these developments, engaging with intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, in Nash, 2008: 2), and examining media representations of class, this chapter argues socialist feminism remains an important critique within the media studies academic field. Socialist feminism should no longer be seen as the theoretical territory of white working class females, rather it should acknowledge all women that are subjected to the capitalist and patriarchal media.

Keywords: feminism; media; class; socialism; gender; intersectionality; equality; fourth-wave

1.   Introduction

"It's not easy being overweight and on benefits, says 25 stone mother-of-two who wants MORE money from the government to help her diet!" (Daily Mail, 25 September 2014)

Another day, another headline in a British newspaper showing a moral and ideological judgment about working class women. News coverage like this is not uncommon, with those on benefits, in particular, being subjected to the title 'scrounger', and women such as this one criticized for being on benefits, having children when 'she' can't provide for them, and her weight as evidence of a lack of control and intelligence. The 'chav' representation of the working class as, *"bigoted, slothful, aggressive people who cannot look after themselves…"*, (Jones, 2012: 121) appears to be ever present in the media today.

As classist representations proliferate within the media, class as a critical framework has re-emerged, according to Tyler and Bennett (2010: 376). This chapter argues a socialist feminist perspective must be embraced, revisiting the integration of feminism and socialism to understand the double bind working class women face. This would challenge the media texts and industry, interrogating the role this plays in the construction and maintenance of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. Class, gender, race, and sexuality cannot be seen as separate concepts but rather powerful structures that oppress women. Patriarchy continues to be a persuasive force within society, with the media subsumed as a site of patriarchal dominance, whilst capitalist ideologies are evident across the media. Claims the feminist movement and women in general have 'come a long way', can still be answered with 'not far enough'.

The aim of this chapter is to engage with debates about socialist feminism and its place within media and cultural studies. This will identify the development of socialist feminism, and criticisms of this theoretical perspective, discussing how socialist feminism and class disappeared from the agenda in the 1980s and 1990s. This chapter will also examine intersectionality as an approach that can inform socialist feminism and highlight issues of essentialism. The chapter will end by arguing that socialist feminism continues to have a place in media and cultural studies, focusing on the representation of the working class and the ideologies prevalent within media texts.

2.   The origins of socialist feminism

Socialist feminism emerged as a key theoretical perspective during the second wave feminist movement, and differentiated itself from liberal and radical perspectives by identifying capitalism alongside patriarchy as forms of oppression women faced. This placed an emphasis on the interaction between

class and gender (patriarchy and capitalism), and highlighted the economic and ideological basis of the oppression of women. These two structures of power work together to maintain women's position, they are *"...not simply autonomous systems...They are mutually dependent."* (Eisenstein, 1977: 203)

Class was seen as the obvious and biggest division between women during the second wave of feminism, the position of middle class women was significantly different the working class. It was the voices of the middle class women that were heard, *"From the onset of the movements women from privileged classes were able to make their concerns "the" issues that should be focused on...They attracted mass media..."* (Hooks, 2000: 37) Therefore the voices of the working class women were silenced. Socialist feminism provided an opportunity to focus on issues important to the working classes. Rowbotham (in Humm, 1992: 92) suggested socialist feminism depended on working-class women, as they understood the double layer (patriarchal and capital) of exploitation and oppression.

Early socialist feminist ideals, to some degree, borrowed from Engels, with consideration of how the family and private sphere contributed to inequalities in society. Engels (in Eisenstein, 1977: 200) focused on the family and private property as a source of class difference between men and women. The family reflected power inequalities in society and this suggested women needed to become economically independent, but women participating in the workplace has not led to equality rather sexism is stronger under capitalism. (Zaretsky cited by Hartmann, in Sargent, 1981: 5) Additionally the role of unpaid labour within the home still often falls to the women.

Both Marxism and Feminism draw on conflict within society, and highlight inequalities that may be portrayed as natural. Ehrenreich (1976: 71) suggests *"Both seek to understand the world...in terms of antagonisms."* This is continued by Bryson (2004: 17) who argues socialist feminism understands equality for women will be meaningless in a society whereby working class men are exploited. Class and gender must be both be challenged as both are inextricably linked to the social and economic context.

3. Challenges facing socialist feminism

The first key challenge in combining Marxism/Socialism with Feminism is the risk of class detracting from patriarchy, whereby the exploitation of women is secondary. Hartmann critiques socialist feminism and claims Marxism and Feminism is an *"...unhappy marriage..."*. (Sargent, 1981: xxiii). This is supported by Zaretsky (1976: 82) who suggests socialists do not distinguish between the oppression experienced by women and more generally the working class.

Additionally socialist feminism has been criticised for excluding differences such as race, sexuality, age, and disability. Attempts to address this arguably resulted in an*, "...increasingly complicated and incoherent theoretical project, which until now has not produced a satisfactory account of the way material and cultural conditions interact."* (van Zoonen in Kearney, 2012: 29). This is supported by Aziz (in Mirza, 1997: 75) with the suggestion combining *"...grand theories of 'race', class and gender may be unworkable"*. This results in the need for these 'grand' theories to be maintained but to find a way for them to acknowledge difference whilst sustaining their individual focus.

A third, and significant obstacle for socialist feminism is essentialism, treating class and gender as fixed and unchanging categories. Academics have discussed essentialism and gender, and attempted to destabilise the category of 'woman', to allow for difference amongst women and reject classic binaries built along the lines of biology. Smiler and Gelman (2008: 864) suggest *"...in the realm of gender, essentialism would suggest that differences between males and females are stable, unchanging, fixed at birth…"*. The need to problematize and question essentialist categories such as gender, class or race stems from concerns that if differences are naturalised and treated as fixed at birth the differences become unquestionable and inequality a natural consequence. Crompton and Lyonette (2005: 616) argue essentialism is linked to political ideals. This can be seen within neo-liberal discourses such as 'blame the victim', and claims of a meritocratic society, whereby the position of the working class is legitimised as due to the absence of natural ability.

There is a lack of depth to discussions about class and essentialism, and theories attempting to address class divisions have been accused of falling into the essentialist 'trap'. Phillips (2010: 49) suggests there are four meanings to essentialism, these include the attribution, and naturalisation of certain characteristics to everyone within a category, the suggestion of a collective due to this and treating shared characteristics as the defining ones. It is clear by treating class as an essentialist category this denies the *"...complexity of real lives"*, (Goldenberg, 2007: 142), and ignores the diversity of the 'working class'. It is important to adopt a non-essentialist perspective that identifies and defines class as a social formation. As argued by Warnke (2005: 96) these social formations are constructed by institutions, social relations, and histories. Socialist feminism must understand working class women have a range of histories, experiences and backgrounds that contribute to their individual identities, whilst sharing the oppression and exploitation of being categorised as a working class woman. Socialist feminism must problematize the construction and assumptions of shared class experiences whilst maintaining an understanding of how class boundaries and inequality has developed. Phillips (2010: 48) argues essentialist constructs are part of our social reality, they are recognisable and cannot be ignored.

Theorists have pointed to the role of ideology and culture as a site whereby essentialist notions have not only been utilised but also naturalised. Whelehan (1995: 55), claims *"...the perpetuation of a society divided along gender lines is primarily assisted by the action of ideological apparatuses which naturalize such social divisions..."*. This leads to another need for socialist feminism to critique how the media contributes to the essentialism of gender and class, and constructs a normative view of difference that naturalises inequalities.

4.   Intersectionality

Socialist feminism almost disappeared from academic and theoretical discussions throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Feminism's third wave had different priorities and ontologies, which Goren (2009: 2) describes as follows: *"...hallmarks typical of third-wave writing and thinking include...breaking down the essentialist construction of gender and insistence on women's diversity; the notion that identity is multiple, intersecting, and shifting rather than conceptualized as a unified self; ..."* Moreover, feminism as a 'grand' theory was critiqued for its white middle class focus, whilst the post-feminist discourse suggested feminism was over, replaced by the neo-liberalist focus on individualism and choice. Against this socialist feminism could be perceived as outdated, class an unpopular theoretical stance, and its existence disputed by politicians. Kearney (2012: 13) suggests the virtual disappearance of class within cultural and media studies was reflected within social and political discourses, although this doesn't mean class was not evident as a problem but was denied.

As class was disappearing other differences among women were emerging, particularly that of race. Black feminists prioritised race as a critical lens through which women's positions were seen and can be used to inform socialist feminism. The notion of intersectionality, suggested by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 that, *"...articulates a set of ideas...understanding that social positions are relational rather than additive and the need to 'make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it'..."* (Gill, 2009: 142). Intersectionality answers some of the criticisms of socialist feminism and the essentialism of class by highlighting complexities within a person's identity. Intersectionality focuses on the differences between women, primarily race or ethnicity, but more recently has addressed sexuality, age and attempted to introduce class and how these unique elements are constructed and interact to inform differing life experiences (Barnum and Zajicek, 2008: 107). Collins (2000, in Jackson, 2013: 47) supports this and argues intersectionality examines the interactions of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism, whilst DeFrancisco and Palczewski (2014: 20) claim intersectionality is useful because it prevents scholars from *"...falling into a spe-*

cific type of generalization called essentialism…". The lack of focus on class, or centrality of class to intersectionality, suggests there continues to be a need for feminism to address class within its theoretical discussions to examine how this interacts with gender, race, and sexuality, and how class contributes to the oppression of women.

5.   The need for class as a critical framework

Class has re-emerged as a site of discussion within recent years, with scholars highlighting representations of class within news media, the obsession with celebrity and TV genres that comment on class. Tyler and Bennett (2010), Skeggs et al. (2008), Skeggs and Wood (2008), Raisborough et al. (2012) and Jones (2012) have debated the position of class within popular culture and particularly the primacy of class identities within British reality shows. This can be seen in TV shows such as *Wife Swap, X-Factor, Big Brother, The Only Way is Essex, Ladette to Lady, What Not to Wear* and most recently *Benefits Street*.

Jones (2012: 121) claims these shows are dedicated to ridiculing working-class Britain, with representations serving to isolate the working class and judge them as 'lacking' and 'morally corrupt' against middle class ideals. This is particularly obvious in self-improvement programmes, DeFrancisco and Palczewski (2014: 19) state, *"…the underlying message is usually about class…"*.

'Chav' is the term often applied to people in reality shows and describes, *"…young, white, working-class men and women as shiftless, tasteless, un-intelligent, immoral or criminal."* (Tyler and Bennett, 2010: 379) 'Chav' is synonymous with white working class, with newspapers often reinforcing stereotypes (Pickering, 2013: 584). This is supported by Jackson (2013: 48) with the suggestion the news is *"rooted in white, patriarchal, capitalist culture…"*, whilst Skeggs (1997: 11) maintains the media legitimates the symbolic power of the middle class. Raisborough et al. (2012: 258) highlight how coverage of Jade Goody (from Big Brother) labelled her a 'chav', but allowed her to 'save' herself with her ability or attempt to be a 'good mother'. The understanding of a 'good mother' is measured against middle-class notions of mothering, and is central to hegemonic femininity. Socialist feminism is needed to address and deconstruct these messages and challenge how working class women are positioned strive to be 'better' (eg middle class). Female celebrities are further ridiculed because of their lack of ability to *"perform femininity correctly"* (Tyler and Bennett, 2010: 381), which distinguishes working class celebrity from the middle class respectable femininity upheld by the media.

Capitalist patriarchy is supported by the media's normalisation of the middle class, the essentialisation of the working class woman, and focus on consumption as a way of improvement. Socialist feminism can interrogate how this maintains women's position as oppressed and exploited, for the benefit of the economy and the 'status quo'. McRobbie (2009: 130) argues ideals of aspirational femininity link women to class and consumption, messages that demonstrate women have to undergo self-improvement to meet the ideals, will continue the oppression of women and maintain profit, through consumption, for the bourgeoisie. Meanwhile the working class celebrity can be used to show evidence of a meritocratic society, that politicians would suggest we inhabit, whilst at the same time can be used to demonstrate appropriate behaviour, those deserving wealth and ridicule others due to their lack of appropriate 'class'. Redfern and Aune (2010: 188) suggest, *"Inequalities of social class are at the heart of celebrity culture..."*.

It is not only the notion of celebrity and reality TV igniting class debates but also the sexualisation of women's bodies. Gill (2009: 142) argues the sexualisation of women's bodies is both shown through a class and racial lens, with the women primarily being represented as white, and a clear distinction between the sexualised yet *"respectable"* middle class woman and *"slutty"* sexuality of working class women. Also the discourse of media effects is often informed by concerns about class and adopts a paternalistic tone, whilst representing the working class as, *"...vulnerable to imitating what they see on television because of this lack of social capital."* (Tincknell, 2005: 93)

Central to these debates is the concept of ideology, and from a socialist feminist perspective how dominant ideologies work to reinforce gender and class oppressions. Academics such as Kellner (in Dine and Humez, 2015), Cooky et al. (2010), Couldry (2000) and DeFrancisco and Palczewski (2014) discuss the power of the dominant media to construct frames, to create representations, determine who is seen, heard and normalized, and give a voice to particular sections of society whilst silencing others. Couldry (2012: 106) revisits this discussion suggesting the media naturalizes a particular image of the world, *"...an ideology of the social."* This hegemonic system is not claimed to be all powerful (Dow in De Francisco and Palczewski, 2014: 255), but is repeated, reinforced and modified to create social norms and in the case of gender and class these are often essentialist norms.

6.   Socialist feminism 2.0?

The question is therefore posed as to what should socialist feminism look like today. The theory must learn from intersectionality and the ideas of diversity and difference this approach has, rather than assume to speak for 'working

class women' as an entire entity. Perhaps an 'Intersectional socialist feminism' would be a more fitting label, highlighting the necessity of appreciating the complexity of female identities that are encompassed under the 'umbrella' structure of working class. Ebert (2005: 38) suggests class is the primary concept in the fight for equality, arguing although race, gender and sexuality are sites of power struggle, the division of labour has made them so, whilst Stern (2012: 182), and Banyard (2010: 206) argue race, gender, class and sexuality must all be considered when examining popular culture, as this will identify the layered complexities of media texts. Meanwhile Wingfield and Mills (2012: 358) suggest class and race are key not just in the construction of text, but in how audiences interpret them. All calling for the acknowledgement of class as one of the elements that informs the position of women.

Additionally class cannot be measured purely on economic grounds. It is suggested economic factors, ideological forces and "*habitus*" (Bourdieu in Calhoun et al., 1993: 4), must be considered when discussing social class. (Lull cited in Dines and Humez, 2015: 39) This links to essentialism, with class being constructed by economic and ideological forces. As suggested by Haraway (2004: 13-14) *"Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism…"*.

Socialist feminism needs to embrace difference and allow for a number of approaches to help explain, analyse and challenge inequalities. As Coole (in Bryson, 2004: 15-16) suggests, there is a need for a range of approaches that are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Socialist feminism does not offer all of the answers, but it brings another dimension to the discussion within media studies about the position of women that cannot be ignored.

7. Conclusion

> The only genuine hope of feminist liberation lies with a vision of social change which challenges class elitism….Given the changing realities of class in our nation, widening gaps between the rich and poor, and the continued feminization of poverty, we desperately need a mass-based radical feminist movement that can build on the strength of the past…a visionary movement would ground its work in the concrete conditions of working-class and poor women… (Hooks, 2000: 43)

As shown by Hooks social inequalities exist, and are widening so to discard a theoretical stance that challenges this cannot be justified. What has become apparent is these social inequalities, gender and class, are mirrored in the media, with media texts using class as entertainment but also as a construct to support dominant ideologies. In addition to this the voices of the middle class continue

to be heard, whilst those outside of this are silenced. This is coupled with the ongoing fight to hear women's voices and challenge representations of women in the media.

Socialist feminism is needed to start addressing these inequalities in media and cultural studies and whilst differences such as race, sexuality, and disability cannot be ignored, class has to be given a position within feminism. Socialist feminism must acknowledge the variety of differences and experiences within working class women's lives, therefore must resist using essentialisms that may imply inequalities are natural. Socialist feminism cannot or should not be accused of prioritizing the voices of white working class, but rather identify and embrace the variety within the working classes today.

While class and gender inequalities continue to be naturalized in society and the media, arguments can exist that suggest working class women are naturally suited to their position, therefore one of the fundamental roles of socialist feminism is to critique this use of essentialism. The media's role in this cannot be denied and therefore a socialist feminist challenge to these representations has the potential to challenge perceptions and social norms. As discussed by Crompton and Lyonette (2005: 616) essentialist notions can be linked to political ideals, to problematize these essentialist categories that are shown within the media can call into question the wider structural inequalities.

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Biography

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