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## “A Stalled Revolution”: What Might it Mean to be Feminist in the Twenty-First Century?

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I am ready to admit that I was entirely wrong. While many women relaxed and believed that most arguments around equality had been won, and that there were no significant barriers to further progress, the dolls were on the march again. The rise of a hypersexual culture is not proof that we have reached full equality; rather, it has reflected and exaggerated the deeper imbalances of power in our society. [...] it is a stalled revolution. (8-9)

So writes Natasha Walter in the introduction to *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*. Before discussing *Living Dolls*, however, I must—as Walter herself does here—take a quick look back to 1998. In *The New Feminism*, Walter wrote with joy and optimism:

Today, women and men are building a new feminism that is working for ordinary, everyday equality. It isn't a movement that seeks to mould people's desires, but a movement that wants everyone to have the freedom to follow their ambitions and dreams without being stifled by that dead weight of inequality that has moulded our society for too long. (257)

I include this here not to pillory Walter but to respond with my own joy and optimism. Certainly, the short but intense span of years that marked the turn of the twenty-first century brought with it a gendered culture that many wished (if not actually believed) to be impossible; my joy and optimism springs not from the current state of affairs but from witnessing the intellectual and political integrity of a public intellectual stating “I was entirely wrong”. Should more people—public figures or otherwise—be willing to make such full and frank admissions, and be willing, like Walter, to take a fresh look at worlds they thought they knew, fewer revolutions might be stalled.

In *Living Dolls*, Walter identifies two particular discourses dominating current popular meanings of gender: hypersexualisation and biological determinism. The first promises that everything can be freely chosen by an empowered individual; the second asserts a fatalistic pre-determination of behaviours and preferences dictated by genes, and should thus be incommensurate. However, as Walter demonstrates, these two discourses are currently working in concert to limit agency and choice especially, but not exclusively, for women.

In the book's first section, “The New Sexism”, Walter takes readers on a tour of contemporary examples of hypersexualisation: from “glamour” modelling to pole-dancing, prostitution to Playboy-branded commodities, and pornography to Disney Princesses. Noting that the “highly sexualised culture around us is tolerated even celebrated because it rests on the illusion of equality” (119), Walter makes a strong case for hypersexualisation being sold (especially) to young people as a way of expressing agency, choice, and freedom. So, to take a concrete example, young women are sold the notion that pole-dancing is empowering because they can choose to do so.

While Walter is careful not to pass judgement on any individual's choices, she is just as careful to point out that such rhetorics of choice are dangerous because they a) mask the realities of those who may not have the luxury of choice; b) rest on a shared socio-cultural understanding of what certain actions ‘mean’; and, c) obscure the issue of whether choosing between, say, lap-dancing and pole-dancing is really best described as a choice at all. The simultaneous limiting of options and emphasis on ‘freedom to choose’ means that “many young women are being surrounded by a culture in which they are all body and only body” (125).

This focus on bodies as the defining feature of identity and purpose underpins what Walter describes as the “New Determinism” in part II of *Living Dolls*. In this section, Walter makes a particularly compelling case for contesting the dominant narrative of biological “gender” circulating in popular culture and the mass media in recent years. Walter has taken the time to reverse engineer some of the all-too-familiar ‘scientific facts’ peddled by newspapers etc., either by reading the studies which supposedly serve as the basis for claims such as ‘women speak three times as much as men’ (a notion that seems to have reached the status of urban legend, so ubiquitous is it) and speaking to scientific researchers who are themselves trying to determine if such claims are true. Perhaps unsurprisingly, what Walter finds most often is that such claims tell us far more about the political goals of journalists than they ever will about scientific facts. Walter’s discussion of biological myths of gender including genetics, infant development, verbal and mathematical capabilities, hormones, and neurophysiology. This scope means that readers are left both with a sense of how widespread such mythologies are and of how pervasively non-scientific ‘science’ is used to shore them up.

Scientists engaged in meta-analysis such as Janet Shibley Hyde, or decades-long research into cognitive development such as Elizabeth Spelke, emerge here as heroic figures—working tirelessly in the service of determining to the highest possible scientific standards what may or may not be true about humanity and gender. That their names are not better known in popular culture may well speak volumes about our current reliance on essentialist fairy tales about gender and identity: Boys like blue! Men and women are ‘just different’! Girls like dolls! In the face of such easy claims, it may not be surprising that we do not hear more from the popular media about how complicated the reality of being a gendered human is.

Speaking with *The Guardian* in 2010, Walter told Kira Cochrane:

I don’t have the personal weight of rage that some inspirational feminists have. And I’m not going to pretend that I do. It’s maddening when you feel a comfortable, middle-class feminist trying to take the weight of the world’s sorrows on her shoulders.

Such honesty helps me make sense of some of the problems I had with the book. Walter admits openly her intention to remain focused “primarily within British, heterosexual experience” (15). The creeping sense of class-ism is perhaps less openly admitted: there are a number of occasions when blanket claims about ‘working-class culture’ or experience are deployed by Walter or her subjects, but not effectively complicated or contested.

Similarly, I found myself wondering if there might be an issue of generational difference which could limit the reach of Walter’s book. Anyone with an interest in feminism over the past twenty years is likely aware of (occasionally overstated) divisions between second-wave and third-wave feminisms; between liberal feminists and post-feminists; between baby-boomers, Gen-Xers, and Gen-Yers. As someone who has been more than a little suspicious of claims about feminism made by “post-feminists” in recent years, Walter finds in me an already converted subject to whom she can preach about the ills of hypersexualisation of contemporary culture. I can’t help but wonder, though, about those who may have bought into the “focus on independence and self-expression [that] is now sold back to young women as the narrowest kind of consumerism and self-objectification” (65), and their sense of agency or inclusion as readers here.

Consider on the one hand the “massive colonisation of teenagers’ erotic life by commercial pornographic materials” (107), and on the other hand the possibility that, “just as in Austen’s time the promiscuous woman was presented in the dominant culture as marginal and to be condemned, so now a girl who has decided to delay sexual activity until she finds a true emotional commitment can be pushed to the margins and silenced” (87). These conflicting codes of behaviour (sexual and otherwise) are embedded in the daily existence of everyone, but it seems particularly so for young people. Just as in Walter’s account of these codes, I

found myself wondering how we might begin to include those same young people as participants; as the speaking rather than the spoken-about. Walter's own implicit answer to this issue comes in the form of mass-dissemination of resistance and dissent:

We need not reinvent the wheel here—there is a great history of feminist argument against the sexual objectification of girls. If we could bring such dissent back into the mainstream, it would give strength to those girls who want to find a different path (83)

This may be true—it is certainly a seductive premise. However, I cannot help but recall that quite widespread notions of feminism have seemingly lead us down the very path that Walter critiques in *Living Dolls*. To expect a simple solution to the complexities of a “stalled revolution” would be at best naïve. What Walter does offer readers is a friendly call-to-arms, or at least a recognition that the revolution needs a jump-start.

It is Walter's willingness to dig a little deeper—both into her own experience and our shared cultural experiences—that makes this book valuable. It is a timely and accessible text; one which, like Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005), has the potential to get a wide audience of readers reconsidering what might be shaping our choices when we think we choose.

*Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*

(2010)

By Natasha Walter

Virago

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