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Individualised Femininity and Feminist Politics of Choice

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Abstract: Women's right to exercise choice has been one of feminism's central political claims. Where second wave feminism focused on the constraints women faced in making free choices, choice feminism more recently reorients feminist politics with a call for recognition of the choices women are actually making. From this perspective the role of feminism is to validate women's choices without passing judgement. This paper analyses this shift in orientation by locating women's choices within a late modern gender order in which the ideal of choice has increasingly been associated with a new form of femininity characterised as self-determining, individuated and 'empowered'. Instead of offering an effective analysis of the changing social conditions within which the relationship between feminism, femininity and individual choice has become increasingly complicated, choice feminism directs criticism at feminist perspective characterised as overly prescriptive. This critique fails to appreciate how feminist ideals have been recuperated in service of late capitalism and neoliberal forms of governance. By failing to engage critically with processes currently impacting on the social organisation of gender choice feminism aids in the constitution of an individuated neoliberal feminist subject which performs cultural work vital to the reproduction of neoliberal governmentality.

The values of autonomy and freedom have been central to critiques of the dominant political order developed by feminism. A commitment to these values has been embodied in the foundational claim that women have the right to make choices which reflect their desires. Despite variation in diagnosing the causes of gender inequality, and proposed remedies, feminism has pursued the political objective of creating social conditions which will enhance women's pursuit of their choices across all areas of daily life. However, as women's choices are always historically and structurally conditioned the act of individual 'choice' in and of itself does not necessarily deliver progressive outcomes for women.

Evaluating what choices women have available, and the impact of the choices they make, has often been the cause of intense debate within feminism. These issues once again find articulation in response to claims made by a distinct a form of feminism currently enjoying increased visibility –a position referred to as 'choice feminism' (Hirschman, 2006). As the significance of choice feminism has been scrutinised arguments have ensued over what it offers to feminist analyses of current gender relations; where this type of feminism fits with other feminist agendas; and how it might impact upon feminist politics within the context of late capitalism.

This article assesses how choice continues to be a fundamental site of feminist politics by critically situating choice feminism within the context of neoliberal and postfeminist social conditions. In this account neoliberalism is understood as a macroeconomic doctrine which valorises private enterprise and deregulation, favouring a regime of policies and practices that deliver advantages to those already holding economic power. This doctrine shapes state restructuring according to a business model and promotes techniques of government which operate through the ‘creation of responsabilized citizen-subjects’ (Ferguson, 2009:172). These are subjects who willingly respond to incentives, rationally calculate risks and prudently choose from among different courses of action, thereby, decreasing the need for governance to depend on direct state intervention.

The extension of market principles to ever wider spheres of social institutions and relations has important implications for comprehending the operation of power in constituting gendered subjects (Oskala, 2013). Gendered power relations under these conditions are often described as ‘postfeminist’ – a reference to feminism’s changing relationship to dominant culture in the aftermath of second wave feminism and the women’s liberation movement (see Gill and Scharff, 2013). The notion that structural factors which once systematically ordered social relations to the detriment of women have now been largely overcome is one of its defining features. This implies that any differences which remain in the lives of women and men can be accounted for by choices knowingly made by individuals (Author 2014; Gill, 2008:441; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011). Because postfeminism is routinely perceived as consistent with features of neoliberalism it is important to examine its impact on the organisation of gender relations alongside those of neoliberalism.

This discussion will begin by outlining the critical role choice has played in feminist thought. These accounts provide a point of departure for wider analyses of how the social relations of gender position women within a discourse which regulates the performance of femininity by normalising particular traits over others (Hatton and Trautner, 2012). Traditionally passivity and dependence have served as points of reference for performing socially validated femininity. It will be argued that choice feminism under-theorises the impact of these sorts of normative expectations and, in so doing, fails to embed women’s choices within the emergence of specific gendered subject positions associated with

late modern socio-historical conditions. This shortcoming will be then be examined by considering how key social forces associated with late modernity have reworked traditional gender norms while maintaining aspects of inequality (Author, 2014). Key forces contributing to the functioning of neoliberalism and postfeminism include individualisation, feminisation, co-optation, and depoliticisation. Research suggests that, in concert, these forces constitute an idealised version of femininity remade through a language of choice and autonomy but decoupled from feminism. By celebrating individual acts of choice as empowering for women, choice feminism uncritically endorses this form of femininity. It will be argued here that this tendency, which circulates throughout many claims made by choice feminism, works to reinforce a regressive form of ‘neoliberal feminism’.

Feminism and the significance of choice

The second wave of Anglo-American feminism, constituted by a variety of perspectives, emphasised choice in its critique of gender inequality (Hughes, 2002:84) [1]. Important differences characterise these perspectives, however, as noted by Eisenstein (1993: xiii emphasis in original) ‘at the core of *all* differences remains “the” liberal feminist recognition of woman as an individual with “rights” to freedom of choice’. Feminism critiqued liberal political thought for being pervasively gendered focusing on how this body of thought demarcated a gendered division of labour and normatively ascribed specific sensibilities to men and women such that the exercise of autonomy was not deemed an attribute of ‘proper femininity’ (Oksala, 2013).

Women’s traditional role in the family has been to surrender their self-interest so that their husbands and children can attain their autonomous subjectivity. The constitutive terms of liberal political discourse and practice – individual, autonomy, self -interest – fundamentally depend upon their implicit opposition to a subject and a set of activities marked “feminine”, whilst effectively obscuring this dependence (Oksala, 2013:42).

Because the capacity for autonomy, and its associated privileges, were the preserve of masculinity women’s exclusion from the status of choosing subject was defined as the foundation of gender oppression. This definition informed a political strategy focused on granting women greater autonomy and the right to negotiate choices independently of patriarchal structures which hitherto had ordered

their lives (Hirschmann, 2010). Effective interventions were made across numerous sites including abortion and reproductive rights, access to education, the gendered division of labour, and sexual expression. Nevertheless, in practice the pursuit of the principle of women's right to autonomous choice activated a number of intense debates. Heightened tensions notably arose in the 'sex wars' of the 1980s in which feminists disagreed vociferously over the status of a number of practices including heterosex, pornography, sex work and BDSM (Vance, 1984). For feminism the challenge has been that when the 'right to choose' is central to a political philosophy then 'you will be forced to confront the fact that people won't necessarily make the kinds of choices you want them to make' (Hirschmann, 2010:271).

An indirect effect of second wave feminism's intention to politicise the personal has been continuing deliberation on the nature of women's individual experience which indicates a lack of consensus about the degree to which it is possible to presume gender power relations produce a set of commonly shared social conditions. This legacy provides the foundations for debates which are again materializing around 'choice feminism' and are finding expression in a growing body of research which examines the wide ranging choices women negotiate in their daily lives according to norms that shape the performance of contemporary femininity. Feminist analyses debate the consequences of women's experience of choice across diverse areas which include the performance of beauty practices (Fahs, 2009; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011); genital cosmetic surgery (Braun, 2009; Moran and Lee, 2013); abortion politics and reproductive rights (Smyth, 2002); classed educational and occupational opportunities (Baker, 2010, 2008; Walkerdine, 2003); religious practices and veiling (Ashfar, 2008), work/life balance (Everingham et. al., 2007; Rottenberg, 2014); sexuality, consumption and body work practices (Evans and Riley, 2013; Gill, 2007); and prostitution and commercialised reproductive technologies (Widdows, 2013).

In the narratives that women construct about their choices it has been noted that the role played by feminism in their deliberations is often either ambivalent or experienced as contrary to the successful performance of femininity (Hinds and Stacey, 2001; Riley and Scharff, 2012; Scharff, 2012; Stevenson et. al. 2011). A defining logic of postfeminist culture is the positioning of feminism as

antithetical to femininity. The grounds for this perceived incongruity can be traced back to critiques of traditional sex roles and social constructions of femininity which, as second wave feminism argued, associated the feminine with passivity, physical beauty, dependence, nurturance and self-sacrifice. These attributes are contrary to women's exercise of autonomy *and* central to the reproduction of patriarchal dominance (Genz, 2009; Hollows, 2000). One of the unintentional, yet enduring, vestiges of feminist critiques of femininity is a caricature of feminists as man-hating, humourless and unfeminine in character and appearance (Riley and Scharff, 2012; Scharff, 2012). Furthermore, because of a perceived association with victimhood, feminism is also dismissed in favour of a narrative which emphasises progress (Baker, 2008; Rich, 2005). The accusation that feminism has failed to move beyond a victim paradigm, and thereby refuses to engage with women's agency, is a foundational premise of choice feminism. By positively evaluating women's choices as evidence of women's exercise of freedom the troubled relationship between femininity and feminism is seemingly resolved. Feminist dis-identification allows women to practice femininity according to the logic of postfeminism, that is, as the product of individually empowered choice guided by an ethic of self-fulfilment. Everingham et. al. (2007) argue that features of this discourse are indicative of a wider *Zeitgeist* which prioritizes 'choice' over 'equity'. In debates framing gendered practices such as prostitution and the commercialisation of reproductive technologies Widdows (2013) similarly notes a shift in language to choice away from references to exploitation. This may be partially explained by a need to counter the perceived positioning of women within feminist discourse as helpless victims, however, privileging choice as the basis for evaluating gender relations can be challenged by the assertion that 'what matters most is not whether something is chosen but what it is that is chosen and whether it is worthwhile and beneficial, or at least not detrimental, exploitative, and destructive' (Widdows, 2013:157).

Defining choice feminism

The label 'choice feminism' was coined by Linda Hirschman (2006) to name the widely held belief in the USA that second wave feminism succeeded in liberating women from inequalities associated with gender (Ferguson, 2010:247) [2]. However, choice feminism does not represent a unified theoretical

position or organised political programme. The term more broadly describes perspectives which share an orientation to feminist politics informed by the interpretation of freedom as the capacity to make individual choices (Ferguson, 2010). The following principles feature in these accounts. Firstly, individual women, based upon their personal histories, desires, and individual goals, are best situated to judge what is right for them. Individual choice, therefore, is upheld as the primary criteria for judging women's actions. Secondly, this view of freedom is underpinned by a narrative that credits second wave feminism with having made women's choices possible today. The range of different choices women now confront is held up as evidence of feminism's success (Ferguson, 2010:248). Thirdly, it is assumed that women today may choose to act in stereotypically traditional ways because they have sufficient autonomy to transcend constraints associated with the deterministic force of those traditions (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Finally, following on from these points, feminism should offer equal recognition to the paths that different women follow and not hold these decisions up for critical scrutiny. In contrast to a more collectively oriented project, concerned with understanding how women might strategically unite around areas where they identify an affinity or shared purpose, the political project of choice feminism is akin to an individualized politics of selfhood. These perspectives emphasise that in the course of everyday life women face a series of complicated struggles as they undertake complex decisions which, it is argued, require them to balance gender equality with the pleasures and satisfactions associated with practicing traditional femininity (Snyder-Hall, 2010). Versions of choice feminism have been used to justify numerous behaviours including women's participation in sexualized culture, consumption of pornography, the adoption of a gendered division of labour, and the celebration of beauty culture (Ferguson, 2010:247).

By drawing attention to the constitution of femininity, choice feminism shares with other feminist perspectives a critical understanding of femininity as a set of ideals and practices negotiated in daily life by women who are differentially positioned in relation to those ideals. Situated acts of practising femininity often involve conflicts, contradictions and inequalities which choice feminism attempts to resolve by defending individualised choice as a guarantor of freedom. Rather than interrogate why it is that women have and make different choices, 'each feminist must make a conscious decision about

how to determine her own path through the contradictory discourses that constitute contemporary society' (Snyder-Hall, 2010:259). Choice feminism argues that for too long feminism has failed to accept women's individualized relationship to the demands of daily choice and as a result has become ethnocentric, falsely universalising in its representational claims, and overly prescriptive in its view of what constitutes a feminist identity. A different approach would be to offer 'feminism without exclusion' by validating all the different choices women make (Snyder, 2008:188). This strategy would serve as an antidote to internal conflicts within feminism exemplified by the troublesome clashes of the 'sex wars' while challenging popular caricatures depicting feminism as anti-sex, anti-male, anti-feminine and anti-fun (Snyder-Hall, 2010:258).

This optimistic evaluation of how to reconcile obstacles contemporary feminism encounters when addressing the complexity of feminine identity contrasts with the worry that choice feminists seem determined to push 'the boundaries of feminism outward – making the term "feminist" describe an ever-widening array of actions – at the same time they are shutting down judgements about what feminism is' (Kirkpatrick, 2010:242). Critiques of choice feminism focus on two key issues. Firstly, the often difficult internal tensions that structure feminist politics are highlighted. Feminist politics can be imagined along a continuum defined by an 'anything goes' relativism at one end, and an inflexible doctrine at the other. To chart this path, critical judgements have to be made, the justifications for which depend on wider sets of political and ethical considerations. In short, validity does not reside wholly with the act of choice in and of itself (Hirschmann, 2010:272). Here it is argued that choice feminism demonstrates a 'fear of politics' embodied in its refusal to make critical judgements (Ferguson 2010). A lack of critical engagement leaves the personal unquestioned and this refusal may ultimately limit the participation of women in changing those conditions which define the choices they have available to them (Hirschmann, 2010). This second critique calls attention to external structural conditions within which individuals are embedded.

Freedom is often seen as an individual concept, something that requires individuals to take action for themselves. But oppression acts across classes of people in ways that uniformly

limit the possibilities of choice and action for individuals within the class... (Hirshman (2010:274).

Because choice is socially conditioned women may not always be placed to reliably know and act in their own best interests. Hirschman (2013:273) asks, 'how do we know that what I want is "really" what I want, rather than that I have simply adapted my preferences to an unjustly limited set of options?' As long as women's choices continue to be made under conditions of oppression and exploitation the reliability of individual choice as a guarantor of freedom is open to debate. Socio-structural conditions continue to limit choices available to many women and shape differential access to resources – economic, political, cultural, emotional – needed if they are to avail themselves of those on offer.

Normative femininity

Feminism, while concerned with the lives of individual women, addresses the production of a collective subject – the socially constructed category 'woman' which organises gender relations. The normative demands of femininity represent the social and material reality of being gendered – a positioning which places women in 'specific relationships to our world that change depending on our location and varying positions' (Marso, 2010:266). Therefore 'although women share no common understanding or experience of femininity, they are nevertheless assembled into a determinate social group through their location within this complex history' (Stone, 2004:86). Enacting femininity successfully, therefore, requires negotiation of cultural prescriptions enshrined in specific formulations of idealized, hegemonic definitions [3]. Specific constructions of femininity convey normative expectations regarding women's right to choice; understandings of what women should value when they make choices, and the goals they should aspire to achieve through their choices. Therefore, women's relationship to the 'choosing subject' is the product of social processes and conditioning which are not of their own choosing.

Idealized femininity often obscures the intersectional social relations which constitute gender by misrepresenting white, middle-class, heterosexual, and Westernized femininity as the norm (Harris, 2004; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Despite occupying varied structural positions subjects are

interpellated through similar modes of address when encountering hegemonic ideals of gender. In practice issues held up as important for white, middle class heterosexual women have not always been those deemed most pertinent for women differentially located in classed, 'raced' and sexual relations. These material differences mean that women often find themselves 'othered' by dominant definitions of idealised femininity (Scharff, 2012). Choice feminism takes this variation to mean, however, that differences between women are so immense that feminism can only remain relevant to women's differences by validating not the *content* but the *act* of choice itself thereby diverting attention away from normative demands of gender. This has led to charges that choice feminism is driven by a 'hyperindividualism' (Hirschmann, 2010:274) and 'possessive individualism' (Kirkpatrick, 2010:245) incompatible with feminist objectives. Guided by a doctrine of methodological individualism, choice feminism appears to assume women are independent social agents with unique selves, all equally capable of taking care of their needs (Hughes, 2002).

Recent research has traced alterations in the quality of gender norms over time to reveal that an intensified language of choice strongly associated with liberal individualism has come to constitute a form of idealized femininity decoupled from associations with social inequality (Baker, 2008; Braun, 2009; Harris, 2004; Gill, 2007; McRobbie 2009; Moran and Lee, 2013; Stuart and Donaghue, 2011). This successfully individualized and 'empowered' femininity manifests in a female figure who is confident, self-determining and prepared to pursue self-fulfilment (Baker, 2010; Ringrose, 2007). By way of this ideal, women are incited to recognize themselves as 'modern' liberated subjects despite their diverse social locations and the material circumstances which shape their choices. Contra to claims made by choice feminism, the empowered 'choosing' woman is not unproblematic. Large scale processes have deeply influenced the features of socially recognized femininity, alongside perceptions of equality and the availability of opportunities across many sites including work, family, sexuality, education and politics. These processes have helped to create a subject position defined by self-actualisation and entrepreneurialism (Author, 2003).

Femininity in late modernity

In a more nuanced analysis of this emergent femininity the slippage choice feminism makes when conflating ‘critique’ with ‘disrespect’ or ‘agency’ with socially transformative ‘resistance’ can be disrupted. Furthermore the tendency to construct feminism in linear terms, where previous ‘overly prescriptive’ forms are now replaced by new inclusive forms deemed more relevant to a modernised femininity, is challenged. Within the context of late modernity the convergence of a number of key developments have impacted on the structure of gender relations and influenced the associated demands femininity places on women. These include individualisation which purportedly diminishes the impact of gender relations on social action (Giddens 1991); feminization which leads to a revaluation of feminine attributes and competences particularly as they are seen as exploitable resources by employment markets (Adkins, 2002; Burman, 2005; Illouz 2007; Morini, 2007; Swan, 2008) and the selective incorporation of feminism into the political and cultural mainstream which works to depoliticise feminist critique (Eisenstein, 2005; McRobbie, 2009). These processes take place against, and contribute to, a wider backdrop of intensified neoliberal governmentality of which a key feature is the expectation that individuals will make themselves into responsible, self-monitoring subjects (Gill, 2007; Inoue 2007).

Theorists who have developed the reflexive modernization thesis assert that during the latter part of the 20th century structural changes in key sectors of society, including the family, education and work, and the legal system, significantly altered norms circumscribing femininity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:102). Social change, it is argued, is driven by an increasing ‘reflection on – and even critical consciousness about – the rules, expectations and norms of “social life”, including those relating to gender and sexuality’ (Adkins, 2002:3). Heightened reflexivity erodes the influence of structural forces on the organization of social action thereby freeing individuals from previously unquestioned rules and obligations. Giddens argues that ‘what gender is, and how it should be expressed, has become a matter of multiple options’ (1991:217). Of particular significance is the extent to which the female biography has been remade as a result with new ‘values of autonomy, independence, and personal space’ emphasised to a much greater extent than before (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:102). The *idea* of gender equality, therefore, while not uniformly established in

practice, represents a guiding principle in the design of women's identity projects. The result is a type of femininity much more inwardly focused, self-directed and driven by *the expectation* of equality in pursuing individualized goals and desires (Author, 2003). Where theorists of reflexive modernisation offer the caveat that the rhetoric of equality lacks alignment with the unequal structure of social relations choice feminism either downplays or discounts the significance of this lag.

Critics of the reflexive modernisation paradigm maintain that the structuring influence of gender remains but in a refashioned form (Adkins, 2002). The dynamics of late capitalism have reshaped women's participation in production relations and socio-economic activities through feminization – a process which incorporates two related dimensions. Firstly feminization describes the repositioning of women in relation to the demands characteristic of the structuring of paid labour in the 1980s (Burman, 2009; Morini, 2007). Key factors involved include

the restructuring of state regimes, processes of deindustrialization, declines in traditional forms of men's employment (especially manufacturing work), the growth of the service sector, involving an increase in the kinds of jobs (such as servicing and caring jobs) traditionally performed by women and an expansion in the number of jobs involving terms and conditions often associated with women's work (including low pay, insecurity and deskilling), as well as changes in household and family forms (Adkins, 2002:59).

Feminization also refers to a further reconfiguration of the economic sphere driven by the increased value placed on competences allied with the aesthetics of the feminine and essential to occupations traditionally associated with female employment, such as caring and servicing. Commentators argue we have witnessed a qualitative transformation variously described as a 'culturalization' or 'aesthetization of labour' (Adkins, 2002:61); an 'emotionalization' of the workplace in which 'emotional literacy has become a vital commodity' (Burman, 2009); 'cognitive capitalism' which 'prioritizes the extraction of value from the relational and emotional element...more likely to be part of women's experiential baggage' (Morini, 2007:40); and 'soft capitalism' which requires new forms of emotional subjectivity and self-presentation (Swan, 2009:88). Whereas the idealized worker was formerly imagined as rational and disembodied – a construction which excluded femininity - across

many sectors of the economy feminine coded attributes and skills are increasingly regarded as exploitable resources that have 'exchange value' (Burman, 2009:139). Affect is becoming an essential aspect of economic behaviour while emotional life increasingly follows the logic of economic relations and exchange (Illouz, 2009:5). This mutual influence restructures the traditional binary of gender organised according to a social division of the private and public in which emotion governed the private while rational calculation governed the latter. Idealised femininity as a result becomes more congruent with the requirements of the market while 'private' relations and gendered definitions of women's familial obligation and self-sacrifice are correspondingly subject to rational evaluation and adjusted accordingly.

Choice feminism claims femininity is a resource to be deployed by individual women within this field of greater opportunities. This assessment has been treated with scepticism for although feminism has played a part in realising these transformations (Illouz, 2009), far from working in the service of feminist agendas, the 'emotional turn' and revaluing of the feminine has been seen as a 'symptom of a particular instrumentalisation of affective life' characterised by the spread of precarious working conditions and the valorisation of women's 'supposedly natural skills of interpersonal flexibility and conflict resolution' which serves the interest of capital (Burman, 2009:138). This is pro-femininity without feminism in which 'the only terminological continuity between current managerial strategies and feminisms lies in the valuation of individual, personal experience' (Burman, 2005:357). In so far as feminism has been institutionalised the price paid is the co-optation of the slogan 'the personal is political' and its reversal to 'the political as *only* personal' (ibid.). Unencumbered 'free individuals' succeed through making 'good choices' while an inability to succeed is interpreted as evidence of personalized deficiency meaning that social problems are de-raced, de-classed and de-gendered (Swan, 2008; Walkerdine et. al, 2001).

In contrast Choice feminism tends to uncritically endorse the compatibility of feminist values deploying rhetoric that privileges choice as a means to maximizing individual well-being while reserving critique for feminist perspectives alleged to have lost their capacity to engage positively with the choices women make. This position contributes to a more general questioning of the

relevance of feminist critique to women's lives currently circulating in contemporary culture. While the value of gender equality is widely accepted this recognition is granted on the condition that feminist politics are 'cast out' for being inconsistent with 'modernized' gender relations - a move that depoliticizes gender issues at the very moment they are granted limited legitimacy (McRobbie, 2009). Co-optation creates the appearance that progressive gender relations have been achieved while curbing the perception that a more radical agenda for change is possible. A number of feminist thinkers have critiqued co-optation as an unintended consequence of the institutionalization of feminism suggesting that without some degree of congruence with existing social, economic, and political agendas feminism could not have established a presence to the extent it has in many Western late capitalist societies (Eschle and Manguerra, 2013).

Some feminist claims, for instance, gained acceptance in the 1970s within specific conditions characterised by deindustrialization, expansion of the service sector and replacement of goods production with investment in finance. Eisenstein (2005) argues that 'most analysts...agree that the women's movement succeeded in changing the attitudes of most Americans toward the role of women' allowing some women, primarily white and middle class, to 'escape from the category of "only" wife and mother into the world of the competitive, individualistic market' (Eisenstein, 2005:497). This view suggests a specific convergence between capital's expanded need for, and use of women's labour, with feminist demands such that 'feminism U.S. style came to mean individualism and the right to participate in the market economy as a worker or entrepreneur in one's own name, separated from one's role as a wife and/or mother' (Eisenstein, 2005:498). This narrowing of emphasis was established at the expense of campaigns addressing numerous issues including 'reproductive rights to battering in marriage to childcare; from freedom of sexual choice to health issues to pornography' (Eisenstein, 2005: 495).

Fraser (2009) similarly assesses why feminism has flourished in certain respects while gender inequality has been resilient to change. She argues transformations to post-war social organization of neoliberal and transnational capitalism converged with second wave feminist campaigns at a key juncture in the development of feminism commonly referred to as a 'turn to culture'. At this point an

earlier, multidimensional critique of the structures of androcentric state-organized capitalism which made demands for egalitarian redistribution were compromised as a cultural politics of recognition acquired greater emphasis. This decoupling facilitated a resignification and incorporation of specific feminist principles that exhibited the capacity to be made consistent with dominant economic and political interests. Like Eisenstein, Fraser criticises the reduction of a comprehensive feminist critique of gendered labour, which included demands for the recognition of socially necessary labour, to a much more limited recognition of women's right to participate in paid labour. This limited 'right', thereby, created an indispensable workforce required by globalized capitalism (Fraser, 2009:16). Furthermore, by appropriating the political and social value associated with women's right to economic independence neoliberal economic systems became imbued with legitimacy and moral worth as it *appeared* women were being granted greater access to choice and self-determination.

Neoliberal feminism?

These analyses illustrate the complex circulation of feminism within a particular set of socio-political conditions and reveal unintended effects of its entwinement with other elements in those systems. Progressive ideals such as choice have been resignified through a process in which their potential is not only contained but reconstructed. This is a problem significantly underestimated by choice feminists in their accounts. Endorsing choice as progressive in this context miscalculates the complexity of gender constructions and social change. In a growing body of literature the impact of feminism's association with elements of neoliberalism are critically evaluated across a wide range of areas (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Goodman, 2013; Stringer, 2014). This literature highlights how the institutionalisation of feminism has come at the cost, in many cases, of a profound transformation of many of feminism's defining claims and goals.

Rottenberg (2014) for example argues that the type of feminism which is now mainstreamed is largely compatible with the market values of neoliberalism. Liberal feminism, which advanced an immanent critique of liberalism by drawing attention to the gendered exclusions 'within liberal democracy's proclamation of universal equality, particularly with respect to the law, institutional access, and the full incorporation of women into the public sphere' has been displaced by 'Neoliberal feminism'

(Rottenberg 2014: 419). In contrast neoliberal feminism does not offer a comparable immanent critique of neoliberal governance. Instead at its centre is a highly individuated female subject who, because she understands that inequalities between men and women exist, is interpreted as a feminist but her response to the knowledge that inequalities remain is to take full responsibility for pursuing her own ambitions and creating a meaningful life through personal self-transformation. Neoliberalism 'colonises feminism while remaking it in its own image, transforming collective liberation based upon a commitment to the common good into a limited form of individuated self-care' (Rottenberg, 2014: 433). This commitment to individualism requires the disavowal of those social, cultural, and economic forces which reproduce conditions in which inequalities flourish by encouraging women to turn inward to 'interiorised affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring' (Rottenberg, 2014:424). Neoliberal governmentality fundamentally involves a turning away from critique of the dominant political order in favour of subscribing to choice as a form of freedom. This reconfiguration of feminism dilutes the force of feminism's critique of the constitutive contradictions of liberal democracy at the same time as entrenching neoliberalism (Rottenberg, 2014).

The impact of neoliberalism is gendered but not just because the social, economic and political structural changes it generates increase levels of material gender inequality (Walby 2011). Its effects also require us to evaluate 'how our conceptions of female subjectivity, citizenship, political action and feminist liberation...have themselves changed due to the impact of neoliberal hegemony' (Oksala, 2013:39). The logic of neoliberalism undoes traditional gender arrangements because by conveying the message that it is no longer structurally impossible for women to be denied the status of 'liberal subjects in the full sense of the term – not only individual subjects of rights, but also egotistical subjects of interest' (Oksala, 2013:42). Although various forces driving social change have played a significant role in redefining femininity through the lens of autonomy this has been accompanied by the entwinement of feminism with neoliberalism and postfeminism – relationships which render many of the foundational claims of choice feminism problematic. The highly individuated subject endorsed by choice feminism is a figure, who at the heart of neoliberal feminism, performs cultural work in the service of promoting neoliberal governmentality while detracting from

the development of a more adequate response to contemporary social and political challenges (Rottenberg, 2013).

Feminist politics has to be able to somehow confront the overarching governmental framework in which the measure of women's liberation has become individual economic success and the choices women are able to make: to become executives or prostitutes, to have white weddings and to buy pornography (Oksala, 2013: 44).

Conclusion

Women's access to choice, and their understanding of available choices, have consistently featured in the agenda of different so-called 'waves' of Western feminism. As the meaning of choice for the social construction of idealised femininity has undergone a series of transformations, so has the relationship between femininity and feminism. By placing greater emphasis on choice and opportunity a series of social processes, constitutive of late capitalism, have altered the nature of demands associated with idealised femininity. These large scale processes - individualisation, feminisation, co-optation, and depoliticisation - have reconfigured gender relations in ways that often curtail feminist demands for greater autonomy. At the same time as more opportunities become available to women the oppositional and critical capacities feminism has historically offered to women have become oddly compatible with the imperatives of neoliberal social restructuring. Potentially transformative feminist values such as autonomy are not only made amenable to individualizing economic and political agendas that do not advance a feminist commitment to social justice but also, under the guise of 'feminist values', appear as integral to so-called progressive, modernizing programmes (McRobbie, 2009).

Choice feminism, while not a unified position or movement, coheres around a set of key principles including a privileging of individual women as best positioned to make choices about how to live; a belief that women are able to unproblematically exercise autonomy because of the achievements of feminism; a claim that traditional feminine norms are no longer connected to gender inequality; and that the role of feminism is to withhold judgement of choices women make. It is argued here that these principles consistently align with neoliberal feminism and a form of gendered governmentality

consistent with the neoliberal re-appropriation of feminism – freedom without critique. The version of successful femininity promoted requires successful subjects to endorse the systems which selectively draw upon and rework feminist values like self-determination. The value accorded to individual choice and autonomy within neoliberalism and the superficial convergence of feminist aims with those values problematises many of the claims choice feminism makes about accepting women's choices at face value as politically progressive. The expectation that women are to think of themselves as liberated individuals regardless of their immediate social position or material situation is a central normalizing effect of discourses of choice which circulate throughout principles of choice feminism. Failure to develop sufficient grounds for engaging critically with the processes that co-opt and rework feminist values by promoting an individuated feminist subject are evident. Instead feminism is constructed as a set of fixed stages in which prior critiques and analytical frameworks are rendered obsolete and, therefore, in need of replacement. This suggests linear progress in gender politics while obscuring continuities in the nature of the problems feminism seeks to address.

The politics of selfhood championed by choice feminism invokes strategies which earlier feminist movements used to politicize social arrangements misrepresented as pre-social givens. However, the 'personal' is made synonymous with individual specificity which, it is argued, must be respected. Granting full scale recognition of this sort places the personal beyond question because the act of choice is politicized as a woman's right but simultaneously privatized as the content of those choices becomes a purely personal matter. Such bracketing promotes a conservative view of the gender identities currently being reproduced through the act of 'free choice' because a sustained evaluation of subsequent gendered selves, when compared against the potential selves that might come into being under different social conditions, is seemingly disallowed. When women critically interrogate their identities; when they question how they have acquired that self-understanding; and reflect upon how they might become different selves, they confront a network of power dynamics through which gendered subjects are produced. Asking these kinds of questions cannot act as the sole aim of a feminist politics but without this focus, 'women are always in danger of reproducing identities and pursuing interest that are already effects of phallic power' (Coole, 2000:43). Refusing to commit to the

development of a critical, evaluative language, linked to the aim of understanding why women construct their identities in specific ways, inhibits comprehension the wider socio-historical interrelationships between feminism, femininity, individualism and choice. The absence of judgement introduces the risk that legitimacy will be granted to those discourses which incite identification with the rational, self-contained individual already deconstructed by second wave feminism. By paying insufficient notice to the problem that feminist values, in a resignified form, have become entangled with neoliberal governmentality, choice feminism fails to offer a critical perspective on many of the ways in which gender continues to structure social relations in late modernity and instead contributes to the expansion of neoliberal feminism.

At this historical juncture a feminist politics of subjectivity engaged with the production of gendered selfhood is crucial (Gill, 2007; 2008). Power works through subjects, 'not in terms of crude manipulation, but by structuring our sense of self, by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity' (Gill, 2007:76). Understanding this set of relationships requires a critical analysis of the convolutions of power present in a late modern, postfeminist, neoliberal capitalist society. This is an undertaking that must be done with the recognition that feminism itself cannot provide critique from an anterior position for feminism too has been incorporated into this constellation with varied consequences. Transformations of the conditions which govern women's choices are a matter of open debate for feminism and a renewed critical framework is required for engaging with the choices that are available to women, the choices that women make, and the choices that are yet to materialize. It is because feminism has given women the legacy of increased choice in their lives that a critical language with which to speak about women's choices is still required.

Notes

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[1] Feminists have debated whether rationality is fundamentally a masculine attribute which should be rejected or whether it is an attribute that women have been prevented from developing. The former is

associated with Radical Feminism, while Liberal feminism, dominant in the US, argues the latter. See Hughes (2002:95).

[2] Choice feminism is a phenomenon written primarily about in the context of Western post-industrial societies. It has affinities with other Anglo-American perspectives including postfeminism which is dismissive of the claim that feminism retains relevance today (Tasker and Negra, 2007) and some third wave feminist positions which argue that gender equality must be reconciled with difference in ways which avoid being overly prescriptive and exclusionary (Snyder-Hall 2010).

[3] Femininity as a social construct should not be conflated with women as social actors. Women are subject to the norms of hegemonic femininity but as social actors are differentially positioned within gender relations.

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