

The persistence of patriarchy

Operation Yewtree and the return to 1970s feminism

Victoria Browne

On 30 May 2014 a conference was held in London to discuss the work and legacy of Kate Millett, an American feminist who rose to prominence following the publication of *Sexual Politics* in 1970, and her appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine later that year.¹ Elsewhere in London, on the same day of the conference, popular entertainer Rolf Harris was in Southwark Crown Court being tried on twelve counts of indecent assault between 1968 and 1986. The trial was an outcome of 'Operation Yewtree', the police investigation tasked in 2012 with gathering evidence of 'historic sex abuse', in the wake of numerous allegations that various media personalities and stars of the 'light entertainment' world engaged in regular sexual harassment and abuse of women and children throughout their careers in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is an interesting piece of timing: whilst a group of feminist theorists and activists were gathered to 'interrogate the politics and possibilities of the second wave' and 'consider how [Millett's] work is situated in and amongst more contemporary feminist concerns', across the city a trial was going on which had been concerned with a comparable set of questions. How are the 1970s framed and situated in the public memory? What can historical resurfacings tell us about our present attitudes and situations, and how might they enable new understandings or social change? Sidestepping the relation between feminism, the law and the police, in this article I want to use the strange convergence of Kate Millett and Rolf Harris as an occasion to consider what the events and public discussions surrounding Operation Yewtree reveal about the legacies of 1970s feminism, and the kind of feminist 'return' or 'revival' that is required within the conditions of the present. My main suggestion is that the silent or missing concept which mediates between the unfolding of Operation Yewtree and the return to 1970s feminism is *patriarchy*: a concept developed by feminist theorists in the 1970s to name

the workings of male power, privilege, domination and violence, but which has become something of an embarrassment or anachronism within contemporary feminism. In light of the current sex abuse scandals (and the continuing prevalence of sexual violence against women and children), I propose that feminists engage in a strategic reappraisal of 'patriarchy', to recover a political interpretation of sexual violence/abuse in terms of structural male power, rather than individual aberration or an 'abuse of power' in more general terms.

Returning to '1970s feminism'

Over the past decade or so, there has been an increasing level of interest among Anglo-American academic feminists in how '1970s' or 'second-wave' feminism is remembered (or forgotten) in mainstream public discourse, and within feminist discourse itself. On the one hand, '1970s feminism' looms large in our collective political memory in the sense that the archetypal feminist figure *is* the '1970s feminist' – a figure so loaded with negative connotations that it has become almost routine to preface any statements that sound vaguely feminist with assurances that one is *not*. On the other hand, however, many of those actual feminists who attained reasonable levels of fame in Britain and America during the 1970s no longer have a public persona. Whilst Germaine Greer remains ubiquitous in UK media, and Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan also have a presence in US media, Kate Millett, for example, has largely disappeared from the public eye. In 1998, she wrote an angry letter to the feminist magazine *On the Issues*, highlighting the financial and emotional difficulties that many feminists active in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s have faced as time has moved on. The letter paints a portrait of a 'generation' of women who, 'having risked the promised (if not always actual) safety of conventional life for a feminism

they believed would transform society, have been left to “struggle alone in makeshift oblivion”.²

The current desire to ‘return’ to 1970s feminist thought and practice does in part stem from a sense of indebtedness to those pioneering feminists, intermingled with a dose of academic feminist guilt for having ‘abandoned’ the activist field, and also a certain nostalgia or yearning for the seemingly more vibrant, urgent political culture of the 1960s and 1970s. This can be described in terms of ‘left melancholy’, Walter Benjamin’s ‘unambivalent epithet for the revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present’.³ Such melancholic or despairing nostalgia has become a recurring feature within Anglo-American feminism, not only among feminists who personally participated in feminist activism and intellectual production in the 1970s, but also among younger feminists in the form of a feeling of being ‘born too late’.⁴

The ‘return’ to 1970s feminism, however, is not simply about indebtedness, guilt and nostalgia. It is also due to the realization that the conventional way of constructing feminist history as a progressive series of ‘waves’ or ‘phases’ has a constraining, debilitating effect upon feminist politics in the present. Feminism’s ‘great hegemonic model’, as Chela Sandoval has termed it,⁵ relies upon a progressive, teleological structure whereby different kinds of feminist theory are mapped out as successive stages on the way to a theoretically sophisticated feminist present, which has overcome all the problems created by feminisms of the past, in particular the dreaded ‘essentialism’. Consequently, certain feminisms, including Marxist, socialist and radical feminism, are relegated to the status of ‘phases’ which have now been surpassed, by either poststructuralism or ‘new materialism’. The radical feminism of the 1970s in particular has become synonymous with everything ‘bad’ and ‘embarrassing’ about feminism: a phase that feminism has grown out of. This not only leads to a needless dismissal of feminist work written before 1990; it also leads to presumptions that the phase which comes out ‘last’ is the ‘best’.⁶ That is, there is an over-reliance on the temporal structures of arguments rather than the arguments themselves. And, in turn, when we ourselves subscribe to a logic whereby feminism so easily becomes out of date, we are playing right into the hands of those who insist it is a relic of the past, and has no relevance in the present.⁷

Essentially, the critical assault on the hegemonic model of feminism can be construed as an assault on a certain kind of historicism, which treats intellectual productions of an earlier era as ‘historical artefacts’ rather than as part of a living body of work.⁸ In its most basic sense, ‘historicism’ refers to the idea that social and cultural phenomena are historically determined: a pretty standard article of faith within feminist theory. Yet ‘historicist’ thinking has also consistently embraced the idea that ‘each period in history has its own values that are not directly applicable to other epochs’:⁹ an idea which has supported the reification of epochal boundaries, and a concept of historical time whereby each cultural production or theoretical contribution is ‘fixed to a linear time by a logic ... that marks, seals, and divides each moment’.¹⁰ This, as Kathi Weeks argues, leads us to treat a given text or theoretical paradigm as ‘not only of its time – developed within a particular political conjuncture and conceptual horizon – but as *only* of its time’.¹¹ So, whilst it may seem that historicism would logically lead to a historical relativism, it has in fact been intimately linked with a progressive understanding of history, according to which the past is continually overcome and superseded by a ‘knowing’ present. In the case of feminism, this means that we rigidly divide feminism into bounded historical phases or eras, and consistently project all those aspects or characteristics from which we wish to disassociate ourselves – essentialism, racism, universalism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, prudishness, humourlessness, authoritarianism – backwards in time on to ‘second wave’ or ‘1970s’ feminism. As a result, feminist work produced during the 1970s is consigned to the ‘dustbin of history’, and frequently dismissed without even being read.¹²

This is not to say that the usual criticisms of ‘1970s feminism’ do not contain grains of truth. Certain texts written in the 1970s, including Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, abound with dubious universalizing claims about what women experience and endure, and insistently proclaim the foundational status and priority of sexual politics over racial and class politics: for example, when Millett incongruously suggests that ‘the function of class or ethnic mores in patriarchy is largely a matter of how overtly displayed or how loudly enunciated the general ethic of masculine supremacy allows itself to become’;¹³ or when Shulamith Firestone baldly (and bizarrely) states that ‘racism is sexism extended’.¹⁴ However, the concern is that in our eagerness to distance ourselves from the more problematic elements of radical

1970s feminisms, we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater and prematurely relegated valuable theoretical and strategic resources to a bygone era. Moreover, when we insist that the 'second wave' was 'white' and 'middle class', the presence of feminists in 1970s feminism who were *not* white or middle class is erased. 'It has become a truism', writes Lisa Marie Hogeland, 'that the second wave was racist ... no matter that such a blanket argument writes out of our history the enormous contributions of women of color in the 1970s'.¹⁵

In response, various feminist and queer theorists have been revisiting forsaken feminist figures, concepts and texts of the 1970s, and seeking to cultivate a different kind of historiographical orientation. Instead of triumphantly leaving the past behind, these theorists engage in a close rereading of specific texts and archival materials produced by feminists during that era, and consider the possibilities and implications of their arguments around power, sex, domination and control for a politics of the present. How might they help us to refocus some central feminist questions, or uncover blind spots in contemporary political and cultural theory?¹⁶ Victoria Hesford's *Feeling Women's Liberation* (2013), for example, reassesses the 'unsettled and contradictory understanding of sexuality' which emerges in the theoretical and polemical texts of the US women's liberation movement of the 1970s, focusing particularly on the ways in which feminists of the era tried to theorize the relation between the personal and the political. On some readings, 'the personal is political' equates to a 'naïve collapsing of "women" into "experience" and "politics"', but Hesford suggests it can be understood as an enigmatic and inherently unstable slogan signalling the disassembly of the modern category 'woman' and rejection of a normative heterosexuality.¹⁷ Another example is Kathi Weeks's *The Problem with Work* (2011), which reappraises contributions made by Marxist and radical feminists in the 1970s in relation to contemporary debates around gendered patterns of labour. She focuses particularly on how the maligned 'Wages for Housework' movement might be re-employed to 'confront the present and imagine its possible futures', proposing that we 'go back in order to bring some of the insights from the 1970s forwards, to use them in this time and place'.¹⁸

My suggestion here is that alongside feminist theories of sexuality, work and labour, contemporary analyses of sexual violence and abuse could also receive a new lease of life through a 'return' to 1970s feminist discourse. As the recent events and public

discussions surrounding Operation Yewtree demonstrate, a robust feminist analysis of sexual abuse and violence is just as vital as it ever was. The case is also interesting for what it reveals about public attitudes towards the 1970s, feminist politics and investments in the idea of social and moral progress.

Operation Yewtree and 'historic' sexual abuse

In 2012, an ITV documentary was broadcast in the UK entitled 'Exposure: The Other Side of Jimmy Savile', featuring claims by several women that they were sexually abused by Savile (who died in 2011) as teenagers. Following the broadcast, many others came forward to make allegations about Savile's conduct towards young people, including reports of sexual abuse that had occurred on BBC premises and in NHS hospitals. The Metropolitan Police investigation into the allegations was named Operation Yewtree. In a report co-written with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the Met claimed that 450 people had reported being sexually abused by Savile during his lifetime. Some 82 per cent were female and 80 per cent were children or young people at the time; most of the attacks were against teenage girls under 16. The period containing most frequent offending was between 1966 and 1976, coinciding with Savile's 'peak [celebrity] status'. Most allegations had not previously been reported to authorities, with victims stating 'reasons of fear of disbelief or distrust of the judicial system'.¹⁹

Under the remit of Operation Yewtree, the Met also launched a concurrent criminal investigation into allegations of 'historic sex abuse' by several high-profile public figures who are still alive. One of the most prominent cases has been that of publicist Max Clifford, who was charged in 2013 with eleven 'indecent assaults' against girls and young women between 1965 and 1985; in 2014, he was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. Rolf Harris was also charged in 2013, with thirteen offences 'relating to the abuse of minors', and three further separate sexual assault charges against females aged 19 in 1984, aged 7 or 8 in 1968 or 1969, and aged 14 in 1975. He was found guilty in June 2014 and sentenced to five years and nine months in prison. Light entertainers and comedians Freddie Starr, Jim Davidson and Jimmy Tarbuck were all arrested but not prosecuted; Gary Glitter, the glam-era pop star, is currently awaiting trial charged with eight 'child sex offences' dating back to the 1970s.²⁰ During Operation Yewtree, several other high-profile British public figures have been investigated for 'historic' sexual offences, including

BBC presenter Stuart Hall, who pleaded guilty in 2013 to having ‘indecently assaulted’ thirteen girls, aged between 9 and 17, between 1967 and 1986.²¹ In the past month, a former aide to the Duke of Edinburgh appeared in court accused of sexually abusing a young girl in the early 1970s,²² and Cliff Richard has been ‘interviewed under caution in connection with an alleged historical sexual offence’.²³

The UK political establishment has also been embroiled in the public scandal, following the revelation of a possible ‘cover-up’ of child abuse allegations against politicians in the 1980s. In July 2014, Home Secretary Theresa May announced an inquiry into the Home Office’s handling of the allegations – apparently more than a hundred related files have been lost or stolen, and four previously undisclosed allegations were only handed to the police last year. Included are allegations of abuse against the Liberal MP Cyril Smith (now deceased) and allegations of ‘paedophile activity’ at parties attended by politicians and other prominent figures. The missing Home Office material is said to include details of officials, MPs and peers all implicated in child sexual abuse, including one Conservative MP at the time who was reportedly discovered to be harbouring ‘child abuse images’ but was subsequently released by the police. Alongside the Home Office inquiry, Theresa May has also announced a wider review of the way in which allegations of child sexual abuse have been handled by state institutions and other organizations, including churches and political parties.²⁴

Given that so many of the accused are well-known figures of the media and light entertainment world, media coverage of the arrests and trials has itself often been tinged with an air of light entertainment: for example, the frenzied discussions around Max Clifford’s apparently ‘freakishly small’ penis,²⁵ or the bizarre incident on ITV’s *This Morning* programme when presenter Phillip Schofield unexpectedly presented prime minister David Cameron with a speculative list of public figures who might next be ‘outed’ as paedophiles.²⁶ The surreal atmosphere has been further exacerbated by the ‘retro’ effect, as we are guided back and forth between the lurid world of *Jim’ll Fix It*

and *Top of the Pops* (two of the most popular children’s and youth television programmes in the UK in the 1970s), and the present world of arrests and trials, where elderly accused men (often flanked by female relatives) walk grimly in and out of court. But, as well as provoking mixed feelings of nostalgia, revulsion and temporal dislocation, the ‘historic’ nature of the crimes has led to significant political and moral questions around justice, judgement, and the value of conducting investigations so long after the acts were committed. One recurring argument – made, for instance, by Claire Fox of the Institute of Ideas – is that we ought to ‘let sleeping dogs lie’, especially in the case of Savile, who died in 2011 and is unable to respond to the charges.²⁷ The claim here is that a ‘witch-hunt’²⁸ and a ‘trial by media’ cannot accomplish anything other than create a hysterical moral panic, raking over aspects of the past that are best forgotten. This kind of response often makes links between Operation Yewtree, the ‘Satanic panic’ of the 1980s and, more generally, the recurring ‘paedophile panic’ that seemingly has become a permanent fixture of the British media.²⁹



The other main argument questioning the validity of the Operation focuses less on the effects of 'stirring up the past', and more upon the issue of historical context, stressing that the different cultural climate of the 1970s must be taken into account. Essentially, it is proposed, if there was an endemic 'culture in light entertainment of inappropriate sexual behaviour', is it really fair to 'persecute old men' for 'playfully' groping their female colleagues or guests several decades ago?³⁰ Part of DJ Dave Lee Travis's defence against allegations of indecent and sexual assault of women during the 1970s, for example, was that groping was the 'norm' at that time.³¹ There is also evidence to suggest that keeping quiet about 'incidents' involving children has been an ingrained part of political and public culture. Former chairman of the Conservative Party Norman Tebbit, for instance, has claimed that 'you just didn't talk about those things'; that at the time 'most people would have thought that the establishment, the system, was to be protected, and if a few things had gone wrong here and there that it was more important to protect the system'.³² As one academic commentator has summarized:

'Incidents involving small boys' were apparently just part of the rich tapestry of life for a few senior political patriarchs ... Everyone sort of knew some senior figures might have behaved in this way, and everyone turned a blind eye. The same is now widely accepted about some people working or appearing at the BBC in the 1970s and 1980s, when boys and girls were targeted with apparent impunity by men such as Jonathan King and Gary Glitter. Meanwhile, the idea of the 'groupie' - the adolescent girl hungrily seeking out (and finding) each and every boozed-up band member she could - was a taken-for-granted cliché of stardom. All in all, by today's standards, the sexual norms of the 1970s are now starting to look like the casual rules of a paedophile playground.³³

Certainly the sexual norms of the 1970s were very different to those of today, and in the wake of sustained feminist campaigning, increased media coverage and rising numbers of individual testimonies the longstanding taboos keeping sexual abuse hidden from 'official visibility' and public debate have begun to be challenged.³⁴ Accordingly, arguments against the investigations and inquiries often take the form of a progress narrative ('there is no need to look backwards'); but so do arguments *in favour* ('we have arrived at a place where victims of abuse feel able to come forward and be taken seriously, and by prosecuting the accused we send a clear message that sexual abuse and intimidation is

socially unacceptable and no one is above the law'). Advocates argue that the revelations of 'historic sex abuse' provide an opportunity to review and improve child protection services in the present, as shadow home secretary Yvette Cooper has proclaimed:

Most important in the long run is pulling together all of these different investigations and looking at what does this mean for our child protection system... This is not just about history, this is about the need for proper strong systems of child protection for the future, so that we get both justice for victims in the past but also a system that is strong enough to protect young people going forward.³⁵

From a critical perspective, however, we should be suspicious of the comforting idea that the 1970s were a 'foreign country': a world unrecognizable to us today, where sexual abuse and exploitation were just a standard part of life. Clearly, the social, cultural and legal environment of the 1970s was very different, but by clinging to the simplistic idea that 'back then it was different and now we know better' we forgo a more complicated history in which feminist activists like Millett *were* contesting the routine sexual abuse and exploitation of women and children. Indeed, the picture of the 1970s as a 'time of innocence' and unquestioned permissiveness expressly contradicts the picture of the 1970s as the 'boom time' of radical feminism. It is true that feminists in the 1970s were not happily accepted into the mainstream, and were themselves subject to a 'trial by media' for being 'humourless', 'prudish', 'man-hating lesbians'. But even if they were on the political margins, their challenge to the sexual norms of their era, and to the deeper power structures underpinning those norms, did not go unnoticed.

We should also be critically aware of the ways in which narratives of progress can blind us to the *continuities* between past and present. 'Paying attention to what was difficult in the past may tell us how far we have come', argues Heather Love, 'but that is not all it will tell us'. It also makes visible the 'structures of inequality and damage that we live with in the present'.³⁶ Sexual abuse of both women and children remains prevalent, and though communicating about it may be less proscribed today, there is still much public scepticism and incredulity towards women who come forward, who risk being branded opportunists, fantasists and liars. Various female celebrities who have now attested to being sexually harassed and assaulted by male colleagues in the 1970s and 1980s have been subject to scorn, and in some cases

misogynistic online abuse.³⁷ Moreover, news coverage remains focused on the individual perpetrators, which capitulates to the idea of 'stranger danger', the 'weirdo' and the 'predatory paedophile', deflecting from the more widespread problem of institutional and familial abuse. The celebrity cases are extremely disturbing, but we need to stay focused on the fact that sexual abuse of both women and children tends to take place in 'mundane' settings, and is usually perpetrated by someone known to them (often family members).³⁸ As several academic and media commentators have urged, it must now be a major political and academic priority to understand the 'matrix of complicity' and 'permissive conditions that prolific perpetrators will all too gladly inhabit'; to 'unpick some very complex mechanics of power and protection embedded in the very fabric of the state, and operating in actions of its agents'. Police, media organizations, central government, social services, the health service and religious organizations have all been implicated in particular ways.³⁹

But even among those who recognize the structural nature of the problem, the *gendered* aspect has been something of an unspoken factor within the recent debates around Operation Yewtree and associated investigations. We are witnessing a 'collective refusal' to consider the operation of male power and privilege that has made it possible for so many men to engage in abusive behaviour and be confident they could do so with impunity.⁴⁰ To borrow from Cynthia Cockburn, 'where is the man *as male*' in our analysis?⁴¹ Sexual abuse and violence against both children and women is committed overwhelmingly by men – by some estimates men are responsible for 94 per cent of child sexual abuse⁴² – and in the case of Operation Yewtree all the accused so far have been men in positions of power. Yet the abuse being uncovered by Operation Yewtree, and related investigations and inquiries, has not generally been regarded as a *feminist* issue at all, but rather as an issue of public morals and civic justice. For some, this may be regarded as a victory for feminism, in that 'feminist values' have been absorbed into the mainstream. But it is not a victory for feminism when sexual violence and abuse are treated in 'gender-neutral' terms. An example of the consequences of the 'gender-neutral' approach is the impending closure of several specialist refuges for women and children, (forged out of the feminist movement in the 1970s), in part because they do not admit male victims.⁴³ This is an instance of turning feminism against feminism, extracting a feminist argument against gender-based discrimination whilst

simultaneously ignoring the analysis of systematic gender-based power relations out of which such an argument emerged. Hence, we are left with an apolitical 'gender-neutral' approach which reverses decades of feminist organizing to ensure the provision of specialist refuges for women and children only, and avoids one of the most 'glaring' questions that needs to be asked about sexual abuse and violence against both children and adults: why is it so overwhelmingly perpetrated by men?⁴⁴

It is interesting to draw a comparison here with another sex abuse scandal that has been discussed in the UK media in the past few months: the sexual exploitation and abuse of girls in Rotherham in the North of England. The abuse in this particular case took place more recently: according to the official report, at least 1,400 children were subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation between 1997 and 2013, with some as young as 11 being 'raped by multiple perpetrators, trafficked to other towns and cities in the North of England, abducted, beaten, and intimidated'.⁴⁵ The perpetrators were mainly men of Pakistani heritage, and their victims were often white girls, and the media reaction has been predominantly focused on issues of 'culture', or, more precisely, the 'failure of multiculturalism' in the UK. Gendered power relations have been acknowledged but immediately subsumed within the broader nexus of culture/religion/ethnicity: for example, we are told that the men targeted the girls due to irresolvable 'cultural issues',⁴⁶ 'unhappy marriages'⁴⁷ or a 'lack of respect' for white British women and girls.⁴⁸ And, somewhat implausibly, it is suggested that the Rotherham police were too 'politically correct' to do anything about it.⁴⁹ Indeed, a kind of faux feminism is evoked in the service of a deeply ingrained cultural imperialism: '*they* have a problem of gender hierarchy and sexual violence, which *we* need to resolve by shaking off our misplaced political correctness and intervening.' Sexual violence and abuse are treated as a 'cultural problem' in the case of Rotherham; but in the case of Yewtree and Westminster they are seen as either a problem of individual aberration, 'power corrupting' or fear of speaking out, not in terms of a culture and institution of male privilege and power. The dominant white culture is happy to generalize about 'culture', 'religion' or 'ethnicity', but when it comes to gender there is a deep-seated unwillingness to generalize and examine any possible links between sexual abuse perpetrated by those Muslim men of Pakistani heritage in Rotherham and sexual abuse perpetrated by wealthy white men of the establishment. Moreover,

despite the repeated insistence that we need to tackle sexual violence and abuse in 'minority cultures', specialist women's refuges which do cater specifically for the needs of women from minority cultures (some of whom have experienced 'forced marriage' and genital cutting) have been particularly affected by the latest round of funding cuts, closures and reorganization.⁵⁰

Patriarchy in the twenty-first century

What is missing in the public debate around sexual violence and abuse opened up by Operation Yewtree and related investigations is a grasp of what can be termed 'male power', 'male privilege', 'male domination' or, most contentiously perhaps, 'patriarchy': key terms within 1970s feminist discourse, but which have come to appear rather outmoded, even within feminist theory itself. We have seen a scaling down of theoretical scope and ambition within academic Anglo-American feminism since the 1970s, and a retreat from normative or prescriptive theory. This is partly due to the pressures of surviving the 'mean and lean' 1980s and holding on to ground already-won, but also, as Kathi Weeks points out, because of the 'increasing dominance of a model of academic critique that disavow[s] the element of proposition'.⁵¹ Abandoning a more explicit normative project, she suggests, is a way of avoiding being 'implicated in the normative claim's impositions and exclusions'; hence what Robyn Wiegman has identified as a shift away from 'strong theory' towards 'compassionate description'.⁵² This kind of shift is well exemplified by an edited collection published in 2003, *New Feminist Stories of Child Sexual Abuse*, which aims not to generate 'theory' of child sexual abuse, but rather to describe the ways that child sexual abuse is represented and framed in specific discursive contexts, for example via analysis of newspaper articles, or the language used in clinical contexts. In the introduction, the editors write that whilst 'second wave feminists made clear the connection between male privilege and the abuse of women and children ... feminists have been in danger of replacing one truth totality with another totalizing story of patriarchal privilege'. Therefore, rather than 'situating power in a fixed system structured around patriarchy', we need to realize that 'power, gender and sex are fragmentary and that they exist in a multiple array of knowledges, practices and strategies'.⁵³

It is of course true that power is not 'fixed', that there are diffuse and shifting forms of sexual violence and abuse experienced by different social groups. Sexual violence is not simply a 'gender issue', and

must be analysed along other multiple dimensions of power.⁵⁴ In the case of those accused under Operation Yewtree, for example, all so far have been white men of economic privilege and high status, whose sense of entitlement and impunity stems from a particular blend of gender, wealth, racial privilege and social capital. But, as Gillian Howie argues, if there were simply a 'multiple array of knowledges, practices and strategies', we would be 'unable to detect patterns of regularities and the concept of systematic oppression would be meaningless'. Her further claim is that 'patriarchy' remains a necessary feminist concept, in its capacity to capture 'the depth, pervasiveness, and interconnectedness of different aspects of subordination'. It serves the theoretical imperative to explore 'situational regularities in terms of barriers, obstacles, institutional governance, attitudes, patterns of distribution, communities'; to 'map the ways in which *interests* cohere throughout the organization of object-complexes via a study of material processes and social reproduction'. Even if gender is not always the central or primary factor within situations of oppression or domination, and even if gender categories are multivalent and unstable, feminist analysis does need to be able to explain what makes something an instance of *patriarchal* power relations, rather than 'power relations' more generally. For Howie, the answer is that a practice or institution is 'patriarchal' when it contributes to 'the systematic subordination of the interests of women to those of men', even when women are complicit or compliant.⁵⁵

Sylvia Walby has suggested that there are six key sites or 'structures' that make up a system of patriarchy: patriarchal modes of production; patriarchal relations in paid work; patriarchal relations in the state; patriarchal relations in sexuality; patriarchal relations in cultural institutions; and male violence.⁵⁶ In the case of the abuse being uncovered by Operation Yewtree and related inquiries, these elements are all clearly involved and interconnected. Thus, as we try to make sense of the conditions that have enabled sexual abuse and harassment within political, social and cultural institutions on such a huge scale in the UK, we might usefully refocus our discussions of the recent sex abuse scandals around a renewed consideration of the concept of patriarchy, and of feminist arguments concerning sexual violence and abuse which have fallen by the wayside. This is not to say that '1970s feminism' is a unified body of work that can give us the 'answers', nor that feminist texts written forty years ago can be simply lifted out

of context and reapplied to the present.⁵⁷ It is also important to retain a critical attitude and examine the more problematic aspects of 1970s feminist texts which ought not to be recovered. Millett's resolute assertion that the central unit of patriarchy is 'the family', for example, makes her theory of sexual politics difficult to take up again today, as does her insistence upon the primacy of sexual politics or patriarchal relations over all other forms of domination. But, as Weeks, Hesford and others have argued, whilst 'second wave' texts like *Sexual Politics* may not offer perfectly worked-out theories and solutions, they remain valuable precisely for the ways that they open or pose the *question* of the interrelation between power and sexuality, the personal and the political, capitalism and patriarchy. They can provoke and act on the present in the sense of challenging us to reopen questions we may have stopped attempting to answer, or to rethink concepts like patriarchy which have become unfashionable or embarrassing but refuse to die away quietly.

For some, the rehabilitation of 'patriarchy' as a political concept will ring alarm bells, given its association with biological essentialism and binarism. But the concept of patriarchy is not necessarily wedded to an essentialist philosophy of sex, nor to a binary understanding of power relations. Millett's *Sexual Politics*, at least, is not an essentialist text. It defines patriarchy as a political institution and ideology: a 'method of social governance'⁵⁸ supporting masculine authority and male power. For Millett, patriarchy is a system of values and relations that must be upheld by either (engineered) consent or force; and she speaks of the *constructed* nature of male sexuality, forcefully challenging ideas proposed within biology or psychology that there is a natural or essential sexual development and behaviour for either men or women. Moreover, the text does not present patriarchy as a monolithic, 'fixed' system, but rather emphasizes that it is 'amorphous', highly adaptable and diffuse, taking on a variety of forms in different historical and geographical contexts. Indeed, one of the key themes of *Sexual Politics* is the difficulty of recognizing and catching up with the changing, mobile nature of patriarchy as sexual norms and institutions shift and recalibrate (an aspect of the text which is irreconcilable with Millett's insistence that the bourgeois family is the central unit of patriarchy).

Hence the concept of patriarchy is not incompatible with more recent feminist theories of the meaning of 'men' and 'women', where these categories refer to the inhabitation of a position in a 'gendered matrix'

rather than sex, biologically understood. Indeed, the concept of patriarchy may well be crucial, to the extent that it is the name for the structure which *makes* 'men' and 'women' as we understand them: the structure within which these categories make sense for us, and within which we are *produced* as certain kinds of subjects with different kinds of privileges and constraints. Re-emphasizing the non-essentialist basis of Millett's notion of patriarchy, then, would be one of the conditions of bringing her arguments 'forwards' into a contemporary setting. For instance, in light of the sex abuse scandals dominating the UK media at present, Millett's arguments concerning *force* as a key element of patriarchal society may prove instructive for us to revisit:

So perfect is its system of socialization, so complete the general assent to its values ... that it scarcely seems to require violent implementation ... [brutalities] of the present are regarded as the product of individual deviance, confined to pathological or exceptional behaviour ... And yet ... control in patriarchal society would be imperfect, even inoperable, unless it had the rule of force to rely upon, both in emergencies and as an ever-present instrument of intimidation.⁵⁹

There is a long-running feminist argument that sexual abuse of both women and children is on a *spectrum* of male aggression and violence. Feminists active in the women's movement of the 1970s consistently regarded child sexual abuse as a core feminist issue, with Rape Crisis centres, women's refuges and other women's organizations playing a vital role in opening up the question of child sexual abuse and its relation to the sexual abuse of adult women.⁶⁰ There are clear differences, given that one of the foundational factors in child sexual abuse is the imbalance of power between adult and child: an imbalance which exists between adult women and children, as well as between adult men and children. Women are perfectly capable of abusing power and trust, and in some cases sexually abusing children.⁶¹ Yet, though statistics are notoriously difficult to gather, verify and interpret in the case of child sexual abuse, studies suggest that the vast majority of perpetrators are men.⁶² Focusing attention on the gender of the perpetrator, instead of the characteristics of the victims, was a crucial step in developing integrated feminist analyses of sexual violence against women and children, which remain highly relevant today. As Jackson points out, in relation to Firestone's critique of the privatization of the 'family' and the vulnerability of children to abuse in *The Dialectic of Sex*:

Sexual violence and abuse is now far more publicly acknowledged than it was in the 1970s, and in most western countries steps have been taken to protect children perceived to be 'at risk', but these provisions often fail, and neglect, injury and death still befall children all too often, precisely because of the privatized nature of family life and the potential tension between competing principles underlying much policy and practice: the protection of children on the one hand, and the preservation of family unity on the other.⁶³

We do not need to adhere to the reductive thesis that the 'bourgeois family' is 'patriarchy in a nutshell' to re-examine critiques made by Firestone, Millet and other radical feminists of the 'privatization' of the family. On the one hand, so many aspects and instances of sex/gender relations cannot be subsumed or traced back to the bourgeois family unit – revolving around a heterosexual couple where the male is the 'breadwinner' – that Millet and Firestone had in mind. Nevertheless, we are currently experiencing a significant regression to 'traditional' ideas about family roles in the UK. Even if women are employed 'outside the home', they are still expected to do most of the domestic labour and childcare, and hardly a day goes by without an appeal by a Conservative Party politician to 'family values' or 'hard-working families': rhetoric which is backed up by tax breaks for married couples and continued promotion of private property ownership as a cornerstone of the UK economy. State 'intrusion' into family life is often regarded as the consequence of feminist and left politics in the 1970s and 1980s; but this misses the more radical point of feminist critiques of 'privatized' family life in the first place. If there is a tension between 'child protection' and the ideal of 'family unity' today, it is because the principle of collective or social responsibility for children has to a large extent become divorced from the radical feminist critique of the public/private distinction which shields family relations from political analysis.

The links that feminists began to make in the 1970s and 1980s between sexual abuse/violence and economic inequality also remain extremely pertinent. The picture is much more complicated than

Sexual Politics implies, where 'the position of women in patriarchy is a continuous function of their economic dependence' upon men.⁶⁴ Yet, though Millet offers no systematic critique of capitalism or analysis of the interrelation between sexual politics and the capitalist labour process, her arguments about male domination and force do relate to women's economic subordination within a capitalist economy based upon competition, resources and access. The control and fear imposed upon women and children through sustained domestic and sexual violence can lead to interrupted education, depression, trauma-related conditions, loss of confidence, and, in turn, an unwillingness to 'take risks' and 'compete' in the economic sphere. 'Some women', Emily Driver points out, 'have lost on the job market before they have even begun to compete. This means that many of their male competitors will benefit [from sexual violence and abuse of women] on a practical economic level.'⁶⁵

As well as refocusing our attention upon the relationship between patriarchy, violence and capitalism, feminist discussions of the 1970s can also offer valuable insights as we seek to recalibrate our understanding of the relation between the state and feminism itself. In the 1970s, the debate in the UK became crystallized around the

question of whether women should establish and run women's centres and refuges independently, or whether they should focus energies on petitioning for state services. How can we hear those debates today in light of the seemingly unstoppable privatization of state-run institutions, and the closure of refuges for women and children by local authorities because of the introduction of competitive tendering processes and the monopoly of large housing associations with no remit to provide specialist care?⁶⁶ Can those debates in the 1970s help us think through our situation now? Feminist theorizations of patriarchy and the state are also illuminating in terms of what they could bring to discussions around institutional complicity, legitimation and masculine socialities. Though Millet and others may have viewed the family as the 'microcosm' or 'chief institution' of patriarchal society, she was also insistent that patriarchy was a wider ideology of male dominance, deeply ingrained



in our political unconscious and the very fabric of our social institutions. The feminist denouncement of ‘boys’ club’ culture can appear as one of the most paranoid, outdated elements of feminism, conjuring up an image of elite men patting each other on the back, smoking cigars and conspiring to keep women out. But we are dealing today with the continuing domination of our key UK public institutions by a group of privately and Oxbridge-educated men, many of which have proved remarkably resistant to the entry of women into their upper echelons. It is difficult to imagine that the public review and inquiry ordered by Theresa May will publish a finding of ‘institutional male privilege’; but it is incumbent upon feminists to insist upon the relevance of *gender* to the analysis of institutional complicity and impunity, alongside racial privilege and social class. The unflinching insistence upon gendered power relations and the insularity of certain forms of masculine sociality within much 1970s radical feminist writing may provide inspiration.

To conclude, the recent sex abuse scandals, and the way they have been framed within public discourse, necessitate a reanimation of ‘patriarchy’ as a central feminist concept which enables us to theorize and name systematic and institutional male power and privilege. If we want to reconsider the link between patriarchal power and sexual violence/abuse, we can find useful resources in feminist texts and records of the 1970s; but this means dealing with harrowing realities and uncomfortable questions, and not focusing solely on those elements of 1970s feminist theory and practice that are more easily digestible or pleasurable. There has been a persistent presentation of two kinds of feminism since the 1980s: ‘sex-negative’ feminism and ‘sex-positive’ feminism. This dualistic framing, as Chris Atmore observes, has made it increasingly difficult for feminists to address issues of sexual violence and abuse, for fear of being labelled puritanical and moralizing, and accused of having an unsophisticated, binary understanding of power relations, pleasure and desire. It is extremely difficult to think through questions of pleasure and coercion, subordination and domination, given that they are so often intertwined; and this difficulty is only exacerbated when feminists wanting to theorize and oppose sexual violence and abuse find themselves in the awkward position of trying to make ‘stale old talk about male dominance and female subordination’ in the face of demands for ‘more open verdicts and playfulness’.⁶⁷ Thus, in Meghan Morris’s words, we need to develop feminist theory which ‘might

help us to make it harder for anyone of any sex “in” feminism to think through difficult political problems (pornography and rape come to mind) by allocating rejected positions to the bad, the “heavy” feminist’.⁶⁸ As we revisit 1970s ideas and texts, one of the key challenges is to use them to overcome poisonous polarizations such as ‘pleasure versus repression’, ‘decriminalization versus castration’,⁶⁹ and ensure that the return to 1970s feminism is not simply an exercise in the ‘pleasures of Left retro memorabilia’ but has critical effects upon the present.⁷⁰

Notes

1. To view the image, see <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19700831,00.html>. The conference was held at Birkbeck University. See here for the programme: <http://flyingkatemillettconference.wordpress.com>.
2. Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2013, p. 235.
3. Wendy Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholy’, *Boundary 2*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1999.
4. See Diana Coole, ‘Feminism without Nostalgia’, *Radical Philosophy* 83, 1997.
5. Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000.
6. Jane Spencer, ‘Introduction: Genealogies’, in Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford, eds, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p. 9.
7. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Ian Hacking, ‘Two Kinds of “New Historicism” for Philosophers’, in Ralph Cohen and Michael S. Roth, eds, *History and Historians within the Human Sciences*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1995, p. 298.
10. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Hemmings 2011; see also Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004.
13. Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, Virago, London, 1977 [1970], p. 36.
14. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2003 [1970], p. 97.
15. Lisa Marie Hogeland, ‘Against Generational Thinking, or, Some Things that “Third Wave” Feminism Isn’t’, *Women’s Studies in Communication*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2001, p. 110; see also Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister*, p. 33.
16. Gillian Howie, ‘Sexing the State of Nature: Firestone’s Materialist Manifesto’, in Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford, eds, *Further Adventures of ‘The Dialectic of Sex’: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010, p. 218.
17. Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, pp. 119–54.
18. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, pp. 117–18.
19. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Yewtree.
20. *Ibid.*
21. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_\(presenter\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(presenter)).
22. www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/aug/18/sexual-abuse-charges-prince-philip-equerry.
23. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-28916746.
24. www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jul/07/westminster.

- child-abuse-claims-independent-inquiry-osborne.
25. www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/mar/26/max-clifford-penis-lawyer-court.
 26. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20265581.
 27. www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-19882389.
 28. It is something of an irony that the investigation of Savile and other men accused of sexual abuse is being described in terms of a 'witch-hunt', given that historically it has generally been women in the UK and North America that have been accused of witchcraft or been branded 'witches', especially rebellious women (e.g. radical feminists in the 1970s).
 29. For example, see the libertarian online magazine *Spiked*: www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/jimmy_savile_the_satanic_panic_resurrected1/13765#.VARlvWSwJa8. In the UK, the 'satanic panic' reached its height in 1990. After a steady stream of newspaper stories based on rumours of secret satanic abuse taking place in Britain, sixteen young people from the Langley Estate near Rochdale were taken into care; it was alleged they had been forced into devil worship and sexually abused. After a year-long investigation, the Rochdale parents were declared innocent.
 30. www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-19882389; www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/10/child-abuse-age-of-consent.
 31. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-25880950.
 32. www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jul/07/westminster-child-abuse-claims-independent-inquiry-osborne.
 33. David Pilgrim, 'The Sexual Norms of the 1970s Now Look Like the Casual Rules of a Paedophile Playground', *The Conversation*, July 2014, <https://theconversation.com/the-sexual-norms-of-the-1970s-now-look-like-the-casual-rules-of-a-paedophile-playground-28999>.
 34. Chris Greer and Eugene McLaughlin, 'Notes on a Scandal: The Jimmy Savile Case Is All Too Familiar', *The Conversation*, December 2013, <https://theconversation.com/notes-on-a-scandal-the-jimmy-savile-case-is-all-too-familiar-20379>.
 35. www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jul/07/westminster-child-abuse-claims-independent-inquiry-osborne.
 36. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2007, pp. 29–30.
 37. www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/07/07/vanessa-feltz-trolled_n_5563111.html.
 38. Bernard Gallagher, 'Rolf Harris Guilty: But What Has Operation Yewtree Really Taught Us about Child Sex Abuse?' *The Conversation*, June 2014, <http://theconversation.com/rolf-harris-guilty-but-what-has-operation-yewtree-really-taught-us-about-sexual-abuse-28282>.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. Suzanne Moore, 'Why the Impunity of Male Power is the Big Theme of the Child Abuse Scandal', *Guardian*, July 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/08/impunity-of-male-power-theme-child-abuse-scandal-moral-panic.
 41. Cynthia Cockburn, 'The Material of Male Power', *Feminist Review* 9, 1981, p. 54.
 42. See Gallagher, 'Rolf Harris Guilty'.
 43. Refuges have closed, or are under threat of closure, in Gloucestershire, Cheshire, Devon, Dorset, Sheffield, Nottingham, Somerset, Leeds, Leicestershire and Coventry. Coventry and Wolverhampton are examples of cities where a new focus on providing accommodation for male victims has led to funding being cut for traditional women's refuges. For example, the Haven in Coventry, a charity which has run the city's women's refuges for forty-three years, has had its service decommissioned by the council in favour of self-contained accommodation units and new accommodation for male victims. www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/03/domestic-violence-refuge-crisis-women-closure-safe-houses.
 44. Mary MacLeod and Esther Saraga, 'Challenging the Orthodoxy: Towards a Feminist Theory and Practice', *Feminist Review* 28, 1988, p. 16.
 45. www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1407/independent_inquiry_cse_in_rotherham.
 46. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11066646/Rotherham-politics-imported-from-Pakistan-fuelled-sex-abuse-cover-up-MP.html.
 47. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1351834/Grooming-girls-Asian-gangs-fuelled-unhappy-arranged-marriages-cousins-claims-Muslim-peer.html.
 48. Iman Amrani, 'Beyond Rotherham: Muslims Are Also Silent Victims of Sexual Abuse', *Guardian*, September 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/02/rotherham-muslims-victims-sexual-abuse-vulnerable-girls-muslim-communities.
 49. www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/sep/02/theresa-may-political-correctness-rotherham-abuse.
 50. In Sheffield, for example, the Ashiana refuge for black and minority ethnic women victims has shut after thirty years. Rachel Mullan-Feroze, spokesperson for the charity, said: 'These women have very specialist needs and need specialist refuges. They have been trafficked, or involved in forced marriages, are victims of FGM, or so-called "honour" crime. Many of them have unsettled immigration status and all the evidence shows they suffer more severe and enduring violence because they are stuck between abuse and destitution.' www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/03/domestic-violence-refuge-crisis-women-closure-safe-houses.
 51. Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 84.
 52. Robyn Wiegman, 'The Times We're In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative "Turn"', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2014.
 53. Paula Reavey and Sam Warner, Introduction to Reavey and Warner, eds, *New Feminist Stories of Child Sexual Abuse: Sexual Scripts and Dangerous Dialogues*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 4.
 54. Quoted in Chris Atmore, 'Feminism's Restless Undead: The Radical/Lesbian/Victim Theorist and Conflicts over Sexual Violence Against Women and Children', in Reavey and Warner, eds, *New Feminist Stories of Child Sexual Abuse*, p. 26.
 55. Gillian Howie, *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010, pp. 180–84.
 56. Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 2.
 57. Lynne Segal 'Generations of Feminism', *Radical Philosophy* 83, May/June 1997, pp. 6–16.
 58. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 177.
 59. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 60. Mary McIntosh, 'Introduction to an Issue: Family Secrets as Public Drama', *Feminist Review* 28, 1988.
 61. Mary MacLeod and Esther Saraga, p. 24.
 62. *Ibid.*
 63. Stevi Jackson, 'Firestone on Childhood, Love, and Romance: Questioning the Foundations of Heterosexual Family Life', in Merck and Sandford, eds, *Further Adventures of 'The Dialectic of Sex'*, p. 119.
 64. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, p. 40.
 65. Emily Driver, Introduction to Emily Driver and Audrey Droisen, eds, *Child Sexual Abuse: Feminist Perspectives*, Macmillan, London, 1989, p. 15.
 66. www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/03/domestic-violence-refuge-crisis-women-closure-safe-houses.
 67. Atmore, 'Feminism's Restless Undead', p. 22.
 68. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 22.
 69. Macleod and Saraga, 'Challenging the Orthodoxy', p. 26.
 70. Atmore, 'Feminism's Restless Undead', p. 24. Victoria Horne makes a similar case in 'Institutional Dissonance: Tate Britain, BP and Socialist-Feminist History', *Radical Philosophy* 186, July/August 2014, especially p. 64.