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CULTURE REVIEW

Girls and Boys

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I came to Cultural Studies for the girls.

I stumbled into this field in the mid-1990s, on my way to a PhD thesis on female adolescence in modernist literature. What I found was, first of all, new ways of thinking about how such representations articulated with a history of discourses on gender and youth. I didn't find this in the famous Birmingham School studies of youth, though, which I didn't read right away. Instead, Cultural Studies offered the opportunity to comb through 'theory', looking for a framework that would help me talk simultaneously about a history of ideas and the politics of the present, and about the relations between acclaimed artworks and denigrated forms of popular culture.

It remains difficult to be heard seriously when you take up girlhood or girl culture as things of scholarly interest and value. (Perhaps this is less so for me now, but certainly for many junior colleagues.) Those ideas about triviality, artifice, naivety and ephemerality that first interested me in modern figures of girlhood continue to have sticky consequences. I gained critical purchase from the uses to which figures of girlhood were put by writers like Gilles Deleuze, Luce Irigaray or, very differently, Theodor Adorno, and this was the conceptual framework for my first academic publications, including in what was then *The UTS Review*.¹ But I began to wonder how my interest in theorising and historicising the *idea* of the girl fit with empirical girl-centred research, and about the politics of a conjunction like that.

The Birmingham School's most famous publications sketched a map of British society in transition for which the pressures placed on youth, and tactics deployed in response to them, were central features. On the one hand, these studies offered me a critical vocabulary for talking about a sleight-of-hand in which young people are simultaneously separated from opportunities to claim agency and overloaded with expectations that they manifest all the possibilities of their life in the long drawn-out instant of their adolescence, or else risk consignment to unsalvageable failure. The simultaneously fetishising and marginalising ideas about youth these studies addressed were still powerful almost twenty years later and half a

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world away. On the other hand, whether these ‘youth’ were casualties of social reproduction (*Learning to Labour*), objects of moral panic (*Policing the Crisis*), or bricoleurs resisting cultural hypocrisy (*Subculture*) they were also—overwhelmingly and by default—*boys*. Girls appeared only occasionally and usually on the sidelines. They were the girlfriends or potential girlfriends, the other stories in the schoolyard or classroom, the exceptions in the gang or music scene. Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber’s contribution to *Resistance through Rituals*, ‘Girls and Subcultures: An exploration’, drew attention to the problems this raised for feminists but, as that title suggests, their questions ran at a tangent to surrounding studies.

Cultural Studies in this mode was not feminist enough to satisfy me on the subject of girls, even while a perceived impasse between ‘feminism’ and ‘girls’ also felt like a core problem. Nevertheless, McRobbie and Garber’s intervention staked out the territory in which ‘girls studies’ emerged. Unlike psychologist Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, their thinking about the difference of girls’ youthful experiences was not dependent on any essentialising claims. Unlike the feminist policy-oriented research circulating at the same time, it was also not tied to measuring any specific social outcome. Instead they were asking about the visibility of girls’ cultural practices, about what specially afforded and limited them, and about how they were valued. Such questions have formed the dominant orientation of girls studies.

The 1990s was the crucible from which girls studies emerged as a self-aware field, buoyed by a wave of highly visible discourses on girl empowerment. These sometimes took the form of media spectacles, like the riot grrls or Spice Girls, and sometimes governmental forms like new educational policies, but they belong to an historical turning point in dominant experiences of girlhood as generational shifts disseminated new, fundamentally feminist, assumptions through many institutions, industries, communities and families. We must acknowledge such changes. To be clear: girls’ studies should continue to address injustices faced by girls; improved opportunities for many girls have not extended equally to all; and specific changes like improved educational outcomes and expanded opportunities in many areas do not eradicate all the ongoing effects of patriarchal history or patriarchy in the forms it still takes around the world. But in aiming for further improvements we should both own and learn from feminist achievements, including paying attention to where they have changed the contexts we now work with.

In 2000 I began sometimes working with girls in schools and community groups. Right away, (usually male) teachers, principals and community leaders started taking time to advise me that more urgent problems lay with boys than with girls. They often cited popular publications on ‘raising boys’, or on a feminist ‘war against boys’, and sometimes governmental reviews highlighting boys’ problems with school, anti-social behaviour, or suicide rates. The same conditions that nurtured girls studies had expanded the platform for publishing on the impact of changed gender norms on boys, blending newer arguments with more than a century of discourse on boys in ‘crisis’. I resisted these calls to talk about boys as not my (feminist) project, and even as running counter to it where feminism or improvements in girls’ expectations were held responsible for such problems. I do not want to simply resist them any longer.

The existing field of scholarship on boys is dominated by education, as a scene and as a discipline, and by sociological work on risk and harm-reduction or on pedagogies of masculinity. While boys viewed in this way have been ciphers for society in crisis there has been little wider-ranging thought about changing meanings or experiences of boyhood. Overviewing ‘boyhood studies’ at a turning point in the only journal dedicated to this field, Diederik Janssen notes these emphases, and also that the field remains less coherent and self-

reflexive than girls studies.² He does not discuss, however, how relatively little feminist research has engaged with boys in terms that do not reduce boys to an obstacle to improvements in gender equality or, still more rarely, consider how the impact of feminism might be positive or productive for boys. Feminist boys studies might benefit from lessons learned in the emergence of girls studies. One such lesson is to be careful what we mean by categories like ‘girl’ and ‘boy’, and to respect both differences within them and experiences which blur their distinction. Another might be that, despite the spectacle of ‘incel’ resentment that takes boyhood as a narrative premise, the reduction of boys to masculinity is as problematic as was the reduction of girls to femininity.

The popular sense that an unbridgeable chasm lies between feminists and those concerned about boys is both a cultural and intellectual problem. What seems most urgently needed is thus an *affirmative* feminist boys studies, by which I mean research that does not position boys as problems simply because they are boys, and considers the values produced in and around boy culture with careful attention to context. I am not calling for something as simple as more positive stories about boys, but for productive feminist engagement with dominant, residual and emergent ideas about them, and how these articulate with contemporary boys’ experiences.³

More than twenty years ago, what is now *Cultural Studies Review* gave an unknown writer with a brand-new PhD a crucial opportunity to call for more affirmative feminist attention to girls. It thus feels appropriate to take this opportunity to contribute to its final issue by returning to those questions about gender, youth and popular change from a new direction. I’m still here for the girls. But I’m also ready to stretch that always changing problem space to make more room for boys.

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Endnotes

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2. Diederik Janssen, ‘After Boyology, Or, Whence and Whither Boyhood Studies?’, *Boyhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1–14.
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