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Citation: Duschinsky, Robbie (2013) The Emergence of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 20 (1). pp. 137-156. ISSN 1072-4745

Published by: Oxford University Press

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxs016> <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxs016>>

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## **The Emergence of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010**

### **Abstract**

The article explores the history of how 'sexualization' has come to be recognised as a social problem in the USA and Britain. It traces the 'discursive coalition' which occurred between a number of conservative and feminist commentators, who for quite different reasons wished to justify measures to protect and regulate the practices of young women. A significant strand of feminist media narratives on sexualisation have addressed young women as minors, threatened by contamination, and have proposed measures to regulate and nurture female sexuality and desire. In doing so they have unintentionally offered support to right-wing discourses, which have used the issue to demand regulation of female sexuality and the dismantling of welfare state protections for adults. Underpinning this coalition has been an inadequate account of the sexual and commercial choice of young women, as either simply present or absent. In turn, this account has been organised by an image of young women themselves as either innocent or contaminated.

### **Introduction**

'Sexualisation' has come to be regarded in Britain as a significant social problem. This article examines the conditions and coalitions that have led to this state of affairs. It will be shown that the issue was initially brought to the public eye by feminist discourses in the US, which problematised 'sexualization' as media representations distorted by commercialisation, sexism and an ideological backlash against the gains made by feminism. In Britain, the topic has been co-opted by right-wing discourses, which have problematised sexualisation as a matter of 'girls' using their freedoms irresponsibly and the need for a 'return' to fiscal and familial 'responsibility'. This investigation of the changing history of discourses on sexualization is therefore not solely an attempt to trace the use of an idea over time. It is intended as a form of

genealogical critique, and an analysis of how assumptions built into discourses on sexualisation have steered public attention and debates. As Gill (2012) has noted, these discourses ‘pull towards judgments about “explicitness” and “exposure” rather than questions about equality or justice.’ The historical account presented here will make visible how and why this focus has occurred.

### **The term ‘sexualization’**

The term ‘sexualization’ itself only emerged in Anglophone discourse in recent decades. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the term was infrequently drawn upon by English writers to refer the assignation of a gendered frame to a particular object, such as the gendering of nouns (e.g. de Quincey [1839] 1909: 195). By contrast the term ‘asexualization’ saw greater use, as a synonym for sterilisation in eugenics discourse from around the turn of the twentieth century (e.g. Lydston 1904). ‘Sexualization’ began to see more frequent, though quite specialised, deployment in post-war biomedical discourse in the US and Britain. Here it referred to the gendering of anatomic elements and/or their activation in adulthood for the purposes of reproduction (e.g. D’Ancona 1945; Ionescu et al. 1971).

The term started to gain additional forms of signification and a more general discursive mobilisation in the US from the early 1970s. ‘Sexualization’ emerged as a relatively common term in journalistic and academic writing, to refer to the way a particular person, space or process became characterised as gendered (e.g. Chesney-Lind 1974). In this regard, ‘sexualization’ was situated as a portmanteau of the words ‘sexual socialization’, and was mobilised to discuss the process of normal gender development to adulthood (e.g. Spanier 1975). A related discursive formation, though distinct, was the mobilisation of the term ‘sexualization’ within a strand of the American psychoanalytic literature. The term had been used in Anglophone psychoanalytic discourse since early twentieth-century translations of Freud’s concept of ‘*sexualisieren*’ to refer to the way that a particular drive is attached to an erotic love-object. Beginning in the 1970s, however, American psychoanalysts began to use

the term to refer more precisely to the utilisation of sexual desire, not primarily as a source of pleasure, but as a defence mechanism to protect the subject from anxiety – as for example in some cases of strong sexual attraction to the therapist (e.g. Kohut 1971; Stolorow 1975).

At the intersection between these two types of usage, ‘sexualization’ became used to refer to a form of socialisation received by young people, which resulted in inappropriate forms of sexual desire for adult love-objects (e.g. Kleeman 1971). This articulation became much stronger when, with the advent of widespread public concern regarding child sexual abuse in the late 1970s, the term began to be mobilised in the US to discuss incest (e.g. Summit & Kryso 1978; Finkelhor 1978). Medical and social science researchers generally deployed ‘sexualization’ to refer to a liminal zone between sexual abuse and normal family life, in which the child’s relationship with their parents was characterised by an ‘excessive’, improper sexuality, though without recognisable forms of abuse having occurred. Sometimes, however, the dysfunctional and developmentally inappropriate effects of abuse – i.e. the consequences of abuse as sexual mal-socialisation – were also referred to as ‘sexualization’, or as ‘traumatic sexualization’ (following Finkelhor & Browne 1985), in this medical and social scientific literature. This clinical mobilisation of the term ‘sexualization’ has continued into the present, even as wider policy and media discourses have taken up and redeployed the concept. For instance, Crittenden (2008: 166) has written of ‘spousification’ as a process in which ‘the child is brought up to an adult position. Often the relationship has sexualized features, but not necessarily sexually abusive ones.’ This sustained clinical discourse on sexualization as a liminal state of abuse should not be seen as unrelated to the policy and media discourses which have also used the term; as we shall see, media and political discourses have made strategic use of the potential of the term ‘sexualization’ to hint at this clinical meaning of the sexual damage and distortion of children.

Such narratives have been facilitated, though certainly not determined, by the term ‘sexualization’ itself. A peculiarity of many action nouns such as ‘sexualization’, which are made from transitive verbs through the addition of ‘-ation’, is that they

designate both actions or processes and their result (this can be seen, for instance, in the nouns ‘accusation’ or ‘starvation’, which are both an action/process and the result). The term ‘sexualization’ is derived from ‘sexual’ as a noun stem, with ‘-ation’ at the head following the suffix ‘-ize’ which makes the word a process of endowment. This is mirrored in the retention of the stress contours of the stem in its passage to action noun: ‘sexual’ becomes ‘sexualization’. ‘Sexualization’ therefore signifies a passive process in which the base noun, ‘sexuality’, is transferred at a given time (the same effect can be seen in other cases, such as ‘institutionalisation’ or ‘generalisation’). Unless qualified, any degree of ‘sexualization’ will therefore imply the endowment of a ‘sexual’ property to the direct object – whether this be ‘the relation with the love-object’ in 1970s psychoanalytic discourse or, as we shall see, ‘the girl’ in contemporary discourses on sexual morality and young people. As a portmanteau, ‘sexualization’ brings into ‘disjunctive synthesis’ (Deleuze [1969] 1990: 55), in a mismatched and imprecise way two powerful themes: ‘socialisation’ as a passive process of enculturation that occurs during youth, and the ‘sexual’ as any aspect of gender identity, physical development or erotic desires and experiences.

### **Discursive transformations**

The growth of public concern about child abuse in the 1970s was perhaps the most significant of the discursive factors that laid the ground for the remarkable shift in the problematisation of ‘sexualization’, which moved from a specialised clinical term into a recognised social problem in the early 1980s. The issue of child abuse was initially brought into the public eye in the mid-1970s by radical-feminist groups and feminist social workers and psychologists. This period is generally known as ‘second wave’ feminism, in contrast to the ‘first wave’ of the suffrage campaigners. Among the different feminist positions that comprised the ‘second wave’, radical-feminists treated male patriarchy as the main obstacle to female emancipation. They argued that a broad regime of gender power was built out of and naturalised by practices in the course of everyday life, such as sexual harassment at work or in the home.

It was also from the discourses of the radical feminists that the rape victim emerged as a key figure for feminist discourses. The rape victim symbolically and strategically encapsulated the position of all women dominated and exploited by patriarchy, continually subject to a whole variety of social, sexual and economic violations by men. Emerging from a dialogue between British and American radical feminists, the figure of the abused child was elaborated in the 1970s out of this concern with rape and patriarchal power within the home (Echols 1989). As historians of the period have noted, this abused child was often constructed in Anglophone feminist discourses as 'innocent', in a substantive state of sexual and moral purity (see Walkerdine 1997; Hacking 1999; Lamb 1999; Davis 2005). The purity of the female child was emphasised in 1970s and 1980s Anglophone radical-feminist discourses to highlight both the moral impurity of a patriarchal and capitalist culture, and the sexual exploitation of children by their fathers which has been facilitated by the power-imbalances of family life. These discourses proposed that incest was not caused by sexual young women, but by 'innocence betrayed' by patriarchal rape-culture (Forward & Buck 1978: 19; see also Rush 1980; Herman 1981; Ward 1985; Fredrickson 1992). However other feminists, such as Kitzinger (1988), Bell (1993) and Lamb (1999) began to express concern, arguing that the position of the innocent child as a symbol of femininity had started to backfire. They suggested that it had inadvertently had the effect of infantilising women, legitimising an emerging 'New Right' rhetoric in Anglophone countries that demanded the protection and control of women as part of a return to 'traditional family values'. For example, authors such as Pride (1986) remobilised this figure of the innocent girl, threatened by abuse, to attack the legalisation of abortion as a form of child abuse.

This discursive formation provided the social conditions of possibility for the emergence of what can perhaps be recognised as our present problematization of 'sexualization'. From 1981, articles began to appear in the US public sphere, from journalists and academics, decrying the sudden 'sexualization' of young girls in contemporary culture. 'Sexualization' was used to describe a mal-socialisation, which separates children from their natural essence by causing their premature entry into

adult forms of sexual subjectivity. The first of these articles, and an anchor for the subsequent genre of texts, was an article in the *New York Times*, which investigated the response of parents to the marketing of 'play cosmetics' for girls (Schiro 1981). The article cites Jack Forcelledo, executive vice president of Remco, who states that his company have 'identified a major opportunity in the marketplace - a tremendous potential for us'. However Peggy Charren, of the group Action for Children's Television, is quoted as arguing that encouraging girls to play with make-up 'pushes them into growing up. It's part of taking childhood away from children'. Deirdre Bergson, a schoolteacher and parent, stated that commercial culture was 'priming girls', and that the 'problem' with the play cosmetics was that they were 'all about the 'sexualization' of little girls'.

From the 1990s, there emerged a new genre of texts on sexualization, redeploing feminist critiques of gender power into a moral reading of sex and childhood: child-rearing manuals for parents. One of the earliest and most influential of these was Garbarino's (1995) *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*. Garbarino, a professor of child development at Cornell University and a social campaigner for children's rights, draws on the metaphor of toxicity to discuss the special vulnerability that the purity of childhood has to contaminating cultural representations. He argues that 'an environment is becoming socially toxic when we observe an erosion of middle-class childhood. Childhood is the measuring stick for assessing social changes' (1995: 16):

The U.N. convention is an effort to express a universal definition of what it should mean to be a child, a universal definition based on what middle-class societies have learned about children and child development... it proposes that to be a child is to be shielded from the direct demands of adult economic, political, and sexual forces (1995: 7-8).

Garbarino contends, for example, that since children 'are not sexual unless corrupted by adults or adolescents', the innocence of modern children is contaminated when

they 'are sexualized by the sexuality that pervades the imagery on television and the movies' (1995: 11, 39). This puts them at risk of adult sexual attention, since 'dressing children like adults sends a message' that they are no longer 'off-limits' (1995: 11).

Garbarino's *Raising Children* is a significant text in the genealogy of contemporary sexualization discourses. Firstly, the text provided a model for later prescriptive works offering practical advice on child-rearing to parents regarding children, sexuality and culture. It brought together the realms of psychology, social commentary and parenting to produce authoritative discourses on normality and abnormality, innocence and corruption, positioning the advice provided by the text as a needed supplement to the practices of parents. Secondly, *Raising Children* was the first text to make the now-common articulation between discourses of sexualization and environmental discourses on chemical toxicity, anchoring claims about the social and moral value of particular cultural representations in quite credible and apocalyptic narratives linking nature, purity and pollution. Thirdly, the text is an early instance of a common movement within sexualization discourses from accounts of the essence of childhood to biopolitical judgements regarding who can be considered truly human. Garbarino proposes that children 'become more fully human', more 'good and normal', if granted the enculturation provided by middle-class norms of childhood, which 'provide a social context for children in which each can bear the fruits of human evolution' (1995: 6, 12-3).

### **Feminist discourses in the media on 'girls' as minors**

From 2003-2005 'sexualization' began to ascend to the status of an issue in the public eye. The cause of this rise was that it became positioned by a number of discursive actors as a feminist issue. This is not to say that a single 'feminist perspective on sexualization' emerged in this period; among discursive actors mobilising feminist discourses, or identifying themselves explicitly with feminism, there were a host of different views. Yet a particular, relatively cohesive position emerged after 2003 among a number of media discourses: these discourses tended to emphasise that, in



the context of a commercialised and sexist culture, young women are unable to exercise meaningful choice even when they experience themselves as doing so. These media actors, in their problematization of sexualization, positioned themselves as the true heirs to the feminist tradition and its critical insights, in contrast to contemporary youth.

These avowedly-feminist media discourses argued that sexualization was contaminating the sexual subjectivity and values of young people, encouraging self-exploitation and the re-embedding of patriarchal forms of gendered power (e.g. LaFerla 2003; Pollet & Hurwitz 2004; Haynes 2005; Levy 2005; Dalton 2005). Female consumption has been re-packaged by commercial interests as feminine empowerment such that women are presented with images of female agency that appear powerful, but which are in fact heteronormative, depoliticised, and granted insufficient capacity to actively desire. Sexualization causes immense harm to young women and therefore represents a pressing social problem, requiring psychological oversight and state intervention, particularly through the implementation of comprehensive sex education in state-run schools. Dalton (2005), for instance, expressed concern that ‘women once complained about being reduced to sex objects. Now, their daughters are volunteering to be sex objects... these girls seem whole but they aren’t. There is often a lost little girl inside.’ Moreover, in making children legitimate objects of attraction for adult males, sexualization was depicted as thereby providing a source of legitimacy for child abuse and international child sex trafficking: ‘Such dress prompts the child to imitate adult female behavior that she doesn’t understand. This can short-circuit normal development. It can also encourage older children and adults to relate to these young girls as sexual beings, sometimes with tragic consequences’ (Dalton 2005).

These feminist media commentators mobilised the figure of ‘the girl’ that had emerged in feminist thinking from the mid-1990s. In part this figure was anchored in the discourses of feminist developmental psychologists regarding the loss of teenage girls’ sense of agency and their ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ selves in contemporary sexist culture (Brown & Gilligan 1992: 5; Pipher 1994). However, the ‘girl’ had also served

since the late 1990s as a crucial symbolic boundary separating different modes of feminist theorising, as Baumgardner and Richards (2004) have noted. A debate occurred within academic feminism over whether radical feminism had been too pessimistic about the possibilities of re-balancing relations of gender power, producing a disempowering and fatalist narrative. Within this debate, young feminist writers such as Walker (1995) and Findlen (1995) described themselves as ‘girls’, combating the constraints of the ‘second wave’ radical-feminism of their ‘mothers’ and representing a new generation of feminist theorists in a more emancipated culture. The ‘girl’ became a key site of debate in feminist theory, as a symbol for the question of whether ‘second wave’ theory was out of date as an account of the damage done to the subjectivity of women by sexist cultural forms (Henry 2004). In addressing ‘girls’, feminist theory could address itself to the subjectivation of women. This focus on the ‘girl’ as a metaphor for subjectivation was retained by the feminist media discourses problematising sexualization; however, a concern for ‘girls’ as children simultaneously highlighted the youth and vulnerability of the person suffering harm, making their discourses more incendiary. In addressing ‘girls’, feminist theory could address itself through a displaced substitute figure to enculturation, to the subjectivation of women.

Commentators in the early 2000s also noted that the problematization of sexualization in the American public sphere was anchored in discourses from prior feminist theorising. In their article on the dangers of sexualization in *The Nation* (an American left-wing weekly periodical), Pollet and Hurwitz (2004), for example, note that discourses on sexualization replayed long-standing feminist debates regarding the true meaning of gendered oppression and agency, though with a striking difference in the object of analysis:

It's a debate whose terms are familiar, from the feminist sex wars of the 1980s to the 1990s rise of ‘girl power’ in pop culture to the explosion of feminist cultural criticism that snubbed the old-school women's movement for its perceived lack of an ironic sensibility. But the discussion has

acquired a new dimension now that a mass-marketed ideal of female sexiness derived from stripper culture is being sold to an ever younger set.

These feminist discourses fed directly into the American Psychological Association Taskforce on the Sexualization of Girls (2007), which states that it ‘was formed in response to these expressions of public concern’ from ‘journalists, child advocacy organizations, parents, and psychologists’, citing a number of the texts mentioned above. I have considered the APA report elsewhere, and for now only wish to present its argument in brief since my primary focus here is on media discourses (see also Lerum and Dworkin 2009a, b). In what would become an influential codification, the Taskforce argued that:

Sexualization occurs when [1.] a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; [2.] a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; [3.] a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; [4] and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (2007: 2).

The APA report restated the feminist narrative on the threat posed by sexualization that had emerged in the US media in 2003-5, though it buttressed this narrative through appeal to psychological research. The central argument of the report is that, ‘in the current environment’, ‘teen girls’ are encouraged to ‘look sexy’ – though ‘they know little about what it means to be sexual, to have sexual desires, and to make rational and responsible decisions’. The authors express concern that ‘younger girls imbued with adult sexuality may seem sexually appealing, and this may suggest their sexual availability’ (2007: 3).

Around the same time as the APA report, there began to emerge a large number of popular parenting guides written by child advocates and academic developmental

psychologists, appropriating and re-deploying feminist discourses on sexualization as an issue of gender power (examples include Lamb & Brown 2006; Levin & Kilbourne 2008; Opplinger 2008; Durham 2009; Olfman 2009). For example, in *Girls Gone Skank*, Opplinger (2008: 205) wrote that ‘instead of embracing the gains made by their foremothers and continuing the fight for empowerment, many females today are choosing to participate in their own sexual exploitation. They are offering their bodies to men in exchange for attention and acceptance’, which puts all women at risk by sending a message to men that women, even girls, find pleasure in being treated as sexual objects (cf. Lamb 2010).

However, as well as this mobilisation by child advocates and developmental psychologists, these feminist discourses on sexualization as a cultural corruption of innocence have also received widespread support and redeployment from right-wing social commentators and journalists in the US. The latter have constructed discourses on sexualization as recognition by the psychological establishment and by members of the Left that public morality has become debased, and that the necessary solution is a tighter parental regulation of female sexuality and steps to ensure that girls themselves work to maintain their innocence and health (Stepp 2007). Liebau (2007: 11, 230), for example, situated herself as fighting sexualization by trying to ‘figure out how to restore the notion of sexual innocence to girlhood’ in the face of its erosion by ‘greater interaction among American’s social classes and races, and more sexual license’. Women even carry condoms today, undermining their natural role as ‘sexual limit setters’ (2007: 189). She decries the sexualization that occurs in ‘underprivileged, African-American households’ in which ‘no one teaches these girls about modesty’ by informing them that the clothes they wear serves as a message to men – either of purity or sexual availability (2007: 147, 242).

### **The emergence of media discourses on sexualization in Britain**

British discourses were occasioned, in part, by prior discourses on the issue in the US. However, as Jenkins (1998: 232) and Critcher (2003) have documented, social

problem discourses rarely transplant in this matter without the activity of ‘domestic constituencies’ who have an interest in taking up the narrative. A shared mobilisation of discourses on sexualization, therefore, can be seen as the result of equivalent socio-structural issues in both settings:

American concerns would be accepted and ‘naturalised’ in Britain only if they struck a chord among a significant sector of British society... Parallels between British and American movements can be seen in part as common responses to similar underlying social and economic trends, which have affected the entire Western world to differing degrees (Jenkins 1992: 225-6).

Discourses of ‘sexualization’ emerged later in Britain than in the US, though they also followed the same general pattern: beginning as a liminal form of sexual abuse, sexualization became problematised as a wider social issue associated with the mal-socialization of young people by the media.

Among the first mobilisations of the term in Britain on record, in 1988 a judge presiding over a case of potential child sexual abuse ruled that:

It was clear from the reports of the interview and the oral evidence at the hearing that the child had become sexualized by vulgar and inappropriate horseplay with the father, but that it was highly improbable that the father had indulged in those activities for his own sexual gratification or that there had been sexual abuse in the full sense (C vs C Child Abuse, [1988] 1 FLR 462).

A second significant mobilisation of the term occurred in 1991. Nine children were taken away from their families by social services in February 1991 following accusations of ritualistic Satanic sexual abuse on the island of Orkney, in Scotland. These accusations were based on forensic interviewing methods propounded in the US

(e.g. Macfarlane & Waterman 1986) which assumed an absence of sexual subjectivity in ‘normal’ children, and thus the certain presence of sexual abuse in cases where children described, even loosely, events taken to be of a sexual nature. In the public inquiry that followed the case being dismissed, the *Glasgow Herald* reported that the social worker who had cared for the children on their return flight to the island found his young charges ‘more graphically sexual than he would have expected’, as a result of having been ‘sexualized’ by their experiences in the trial and with ‘the protective organisations’ (*Glasgow Herald* 1992). The C vs C trial and the coverage of the children returning home following the Orkney Satanic abuse case, are two early instances in Britain where ‘sexualization’ was used to refer to the liminal zone between normality and sexual abuse.

Yet the term ‘sexualization’ began to shift in meaning in late 1992 and throughout 1993 in a series of articles in *The Independent*, discussing adolescent sexuality and threats to childhood innocence. *The Independent*, founded only a few years before in 1986, was then a broadsheet publication aiming to contribute a distinctive voice on the centre-left of British politics (between *The Guardian* on the left and *The Times* in the centre). In an article of November 1992, for example, Dr. Fay Hutchinson of the London Brook Advisory Centre is cited as arguing for the need for more effective sex education, to protect girls from the pregnancies that follow from ‘an explicit sexualization of our young people. We allow them adult clothes and adult things’ when in fact ‘at 13 and 14 these girls are more at the stage of needing to love puppies and kittens. At this age girls like fluffy toys’ (Hall 1992). In April 1993, *The Independent* condemned the ‘little-girl look’ adopted by the then nineteen-year-old model Kate Moss in a photo-shoot for *Vogue*. The article stated that ‘the magazine has sanctioned images that resonate with the sexualization of children. That is irresponsible. Sexual abuse of the young is a harrowing truth of our times’ (Hume 1993)

### **The diversity of feminist mobilisations of ‘sexualization’**

In the British press, 'sexualization' came increasingly to refer to a social and moral corruption of girls by corrupting sexual representations in the commercial media. There was a strong focus on girls in this narrative (see Aaronovitch 1996), since any girl showing signs of adult sexuality was constructed as 'mainstreaming' the abnormal predilections of adult sexual predators, thereby making every child more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Hanson (1996) wrote in *The Independent* that the 'sexualisation of children's clothes':

... gives all sorts of strange messages. I hate seeing children done up in what are really caricatures of sexy adults' clothes suggesting an identity that isn't part of childhood - very tight, black and shimmery and glittery. I think mothers have a responsibility to ensure that children have a childhood. The younger the child is, the more complicated. There are people who have confused boundaries about sexuality and I don't think we should put opportunity in their way (Hanson 1996).

Similarly, Smith (2008) argued that, as a result of their consumption of distorting and inauthentic cultural representations, 'teenage girls' do not have access to the 'feminist' counter-discourses that will 'allow them to be themselves':

I worry that there has been a generational slip - that a generation of teenage girls has missed out on feminist ideas and is having to deal with an increasingly exploitative culture without the tools to look beyond the surface glitter (Smith 2008).

Such media discourses represent a problematization that can be identified as equivalent to the US feminist media discourses, positioning sexualization as a corruption of young women by sexist cultural forms such that their commercial and sexual choices do not count as meaningful but rather are the effects of their cultural

oppression. For instance, Roberts (2003) began her article 'Cheated Out of Childhood' with an identification of the US origins of her problematisation:

The New York Times calls it 'whores wars' - the battle that marks the beginning of the school year when eight-year-olds shop for their winter wardrobe. Most parents want clothes that work for children; the kids demand the lapdancers' gear and Beyoncé bits that pass for junior playground chic.

The impact of the tartification of childhood - the relentless sexualisation of the young and the determination of the market to hook them into money-making adolescence as soon as they toddle from the cradle - is now beginning to seep through even the toughest of parental fortifications. So what price the future of the unprotected?

In this strand of feminist media discourses on sexualization, a common narrative can be discerned regarding the cultural corruption of girls by a misogynistic culture, with the result that their sexual and commercial choices cannot be recognised as meaningful agency. Yet the diversity of feminist mobilisations of the issue of 'sexualization' must be recognised. In particular, a crucial distinction can be drawn between those discourses that focused primarily on gendered relations of power and those that made undifferentiated claims about the dangers of sex to girls.

Toynbee's (2008) article, for example, slides in her discussion of sexualization from a discussion of gender power into a discussion of the inappropriate signification of sexual desire in children. Toynbee argued that 'girlification is destroying all the hope we felt in 1968', a year that for her symbolises the aim of the feminist project of rearranging in a less oppressive way 'elemental things between women and men and families'. Yet instead of remaining faithful to second wave feminism, young women are becoming 'sexualised'. She re-asserted the feminist message that 'equal pay and equal power are closely connected with an escape from princess pink. Can I really be



writing this still, now? After all those years?’ Toynbee’s article used the term ‘sexualization’ primarily to refer to the restrictive gendered norms shaping young female subjectivities, though she slides into a discussion under the same rubric of the inappropriate combination of sexual signifiers and childhood. Thus she described ‘pink, pink everywhere - and it damages girls’ brains. That’s before you start on thongs for seven-year-olds and sexy slogans on three-year-olds’ T-shirts. A report from the American Psychological Association shows how sexualisation harms girls - and it’s getting worse, more of it and more extreme.’

A less ambivalent example is Alibhai-Brown (2009), who described herself as a ‘left-of-centre commentator’ and ‘a defender of the rights of women and girls’. Yet she stated that it is ‘no betrayal of what I have always believed in’ to characterise comprehensive sex education as a ‘sexualisation’ of children. She stated that ‘for an old feminist like me, the gains we made were many, but we have failed to equip young females with the tools they need to withstand the pressures put on them’. For Alibhai-Brown it is ‘quite scandalous that the fourth richest nation in the world is still unable to find its moral centre and to prevent such levels of sexual incontinence and irresponsibility’. Of all the problems facing women in contemporary British society, Alibhai-Brown (2011) added in a later article that ‘the sexualisation of young women is proving the most effective whip against female progress’, and makes for ‘a poisonous environment in which to be a woman’.

### **The responsible right-wing**

Yet following their emergence in *The Independent* in the early 1990s, discourses on sexualization have also been mobilised within the right-wing tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail*, and to a degree in the centre-right broadsheet *Daily Telegraph*. The feminist media discourses on sexualization as a corruption of girls, situated as minors, had the unintended consequence of facilitating right-wing support and co-option of the issue of sexualization, with the regulation of female sexuality situated as a matter of morality and public decency.

Parents, generally mothers, are addressed by such a narrative as agents with a pressing imperative to protect and regulate their innocent children in the context of sexual threats from outside the home (see e.g. Appleyard 1998; Shakinovsky 2002; Jones 2002; Poulter 2010). These discourses suggested that sexualization served to express and further contribute to the destruction of national public morality. In an early and indicative instance of this framing, an editorial in *The Daily Mail* (*The Daily Mail*, 10th June 1993) mobilised the issue of sexualization to castigate the irresponsibility of those who would critically discuss representations of childhood innocence and purity. The editorial argued that ‘in expressing this opinion publicly’ (that not all adolescent girls should be conceptualised as innocent and pure), a speaker is ‘giving the green light to paedophiles’ in the context of ‘the “sexualisation” of children and pre-pubescent girls’ (cf. *The Independent*, 2nd August 1994).

Besides their association with right-wing media outlets, these narratives that problematize sexualization as moral decline can be identified as oriented by a ‘right-wing’ political agenda. I am aware that essential meanings of ‘left’ and ‘right’ do not exist outside of discourse, and that therefore my own identification of a particular narrative with the contemporary Anglophone ‘right’ cannot be seen as a politically-neutral move. I justify my analysis on the basis that narratives concerned above all with the moral decline of national culture caused by the immorality of women have long been identified by social and political scientists as a strategy characteristic of Anglophone ‘right-wing’ discursive actors, without supposing that all right-wing actors will use such a narrative (see e.g. Eatwell & O’Sullivan 1990). Whereas feminist discourses positioned themselves as primarily concerned with the well-being of girls, right-wing discourses on sexualization expressed concern primarily with the breach of (gendered) norms of propriety and moral decency.

Within these narratives of moral decline, a ‘basic’ and an ‘elaborated’ position on sexualization can be discerned. The ‘basic’ position on the issue of sexualization has been a tale of moral decline as caused by the spread of personal immorality and deviant practices. For example, Julian Brazier, then Conservative MP for Canterbury, placed ‘sexualisation’ as both the cause and consequence of an amendment to the

Crime and Disorder Bill 1998 that would lower the age of consent for homosexuals to match that of heterosexuals (Pierce 1998). Yet an elaboration upon this basic right-wing position has emerged since the early 2000s; from the perspective of social theory, it can be identified as a ‘neo-liberal’ framing. I shall term this neo-liberal problematization of sexualization ‘*responsible right-wing*’ discourses, since it has been closely associated with their construction of a need for adults to take responsibility for their children, and the state for the well-being of the nation, in the context of a widespread breakdown in societal, familial and personal value-systems. In one of the first such instances of the ‘responsible right-wing’ narrative, *The Daily Mail* mobilised the problematization of the sexualization to castigate the irresponsibility those who would critically discuss representations of childhood innocence and purity. The editorial argued that ‘in expressing this opinion publicly’ a speaker is ‘giving the green light to paedophiles’, in the context of ‘the ‘sexualization’ of children and pre-pubescent girls’ in contemporary ‘consumer society’ (*Daily Mail* 1993; cf. the response by *The Independent* 1994).

By the late 1990s, this ‘responsible right-wing’ narrative mobilised sexualization to suggest the contamination of moral values in society, the breakdown of the nuclear family, and the lack of adult ‘responsibility’:

Children who watch a procession of boyfriends in and out of their mother's bed learn from this experience that sex, impermanence and instant gratification go together.... It is only if we end our culture of adult irresponsibility that we will restore childhood innocence, whose destruction is so shockingly in evidence (Phillips 2002).

Some neo-liberal discourses co-opted appeal to the feminist tradition. As McRobbie (2009) has discerned, such a strategy ‘takes feminism into account’ by claiming ownership of the cause whilst simultaneously constructing feminism as a now outdated ideology:

One can't help but wonder what happened to feminism and its lessons. On the one hand, girls drink like men; on the other they dress in a manner that invites sexual objectification. Do these young girls even know what feminism is? 'The problem is that teenagers have rejected the values of the previous era and to reject the values of the Sixties or Seventies, which was very laissezfaire, you have to go very far,' says Dr Pat Spungin, psychologist and founder of parenting website raisingkids.co.uk. The bar has unquestionably been raised. Where will it end? In bizarre fetishism or S&M as teens strive to outdo each other? (Lichtenstein 2009).

A significant actor in the shaping of this 'responsible right-wing' problematization of sexualization has been David Cameron, now Prime Minister of Britain. Soon after his election to the role of Leader of the Opposition, he positioned his party against the 'harmful and creepy' sexualization of young girls. Against critics who had accused him of an overly libertarian approach to market-forces, the Leader of the Opposition asserted that he was willing to enact regulation if was for the sake of the innocence of childhood:

Like many parents I talk to, I'm concerned by the impact on children of the increasingly aggressive interface of commercialisation and sexualization. I have no desire to wrap kids in cotton wool: growing up is about finding out what goes on in the real world. But the protection of childhood innocence against premature sexualization is something worth fighting for (Cameron, cited in Crerar 2006).

In such discourses on sexualization, the figure of 'the child' is mobilised to draw a symbolic boundary within discourses on the 'responsible' subject, placing as a legal and social minor those young women who are not seen as capable of making appropriate and socially beneficial decisions. In the central speech of the 2009 Conservative Party conference, entitled 'Putting Britain back on her feet', Cameron

mobilised the threat of sexualisation to childhood as a discursive strategy to legitimise financial measures to incentivise heterosexual marriage, and to shift governmental functions towards a market-model and to radically scale back the welfare state. Only in this way would Britain be ‘back on her feet’, behaving responsibly – free of ‘her’ fiscal debt and of ‘her’ sexual/moral dissolution:

Why do so many magazines and websites and music videos make children insecure about the way they look or the experiences they haven't even had? And it's about our society. We give our children more and more rights, and we trust our teachers less and less. We've got to stop treating children like adults and adults like children. It is about everyone taking responsibility. The more that we as a society do, the less we will need government to do. But you can't expect families to behave responsibly when the welfare system works in the opposite direction (Cameron 2009).

This division between innocent child and responsible adult has appeared repeatedly in subsequent justifications for neo-liberal economic policies: ‘do we want a country where politicians, bureaucrats and the powers-that-be treat everyone like children who are incapable of taking their own decisions and taking responsibility for their lives? Or do we want a country where we treat adults like adults, and give them more power and more responsibility over their lives?’ (Cameron, in Morris 2011).

### **Concluding reflections**

Tracing a genealogy of the emergence of media discourses on ‘sexualization’ shows that a ‘discursive coalition’ has been in operation (Hajer 1995: 65): an ensemble of narratives that contain assumptions which permits them to mesh together to shape a particular problematisation of a policy issue. Despite their differences in emphasis, the various discourses on ‘sexualisation’ in Britain have narrated an innocent young girl, threatened by the intrusion of corrupting cultural forms. The construction of the threat

posed by sexualization is grounded in and legitimates practices that regulate the choices of young women, positioned as unable to stand as adequate cultural agents because necessarily either innocent or corrupted. In this way, discourses regarding the *propriety* of cultural consumption smuggle assumptions regarding the *proper* form of the subjects about which they express concern. As I have shown elsewhere, this effect can be seen also in the policy texts on sexualisation commissioned by the Home Office since 2010: the *Papadopoulos Review on the Sexualisation of Young People* (2010) and *Bailey Review* (2011) (Duschinsky 2012; Barker & Duschinsky 2012).

Some of the feminist discursive actors who themselves helped initially to problematize ‘sexualization’ have argued against further use of the discourse. For example, Moore (2011) has argued in *The Guardian* that ‘the awkward encounter between the right and feminism is premised on this daft word, sexualisation’. She states her regret at helping to popularise the discourse, which has drawn attention away from the ‘the real but difficult questions’ of material and gender inequalities by making the issue the destruction of ‘innocence’ represented by the sexuality and desire of young people. The contribution of feminist discourses to the media and policy concerns, she contended, has been less to successfully raise awareness of sexism in contemporary British society and more to focus moral and medical attention on young women; this has been to the great advantage of right-wing discourses, ‘in the attempt to control female sexuality’.

My genealogy here suggests that, in order to move past the problems with the debate on ‘sexualization’, we need to critique depictions of young women as either devoid of choice or exercising untrammelled choice, and as either innocent children or as responsible neo-liberal agents. It is this stark opposition between agency or oppression, produced by ‘sexualisation’ to the extent that it speaks of the contamination of innocence by sexuality, that has produced as a re-hash of the 1980s feminist ‘sex wars’: the fundamental split between liberal and radical/socialist feminisms was ever precisely along the axis of whether personal choice/consent is ethically meaningful (Duschinsky 2013). Yet we do not need to use the binary oppositions between agency and oppression, innocence and responsibility, to address

the rise of new sexist cultural forms and narrowly sexual subject-positions in society today. We can treat female subjects rather as mobilising polyvalent cultural resources in the context of material and gendered inequalities. Moreover, we can recognise that these practices are, at the very same time, deeply embroiled in and disruptive of particular elements of relations of gender power (see Renold & Ringrose 2011; Vares et al. 2011).

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