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Beyond anti-welfarism and feminist social media mud-slinging: Jo Littler interviews Angela McRobbie

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Abstract

In this wide-ranging interview, which took place in spring 2021, Angela McRobbie talks about her work in relation to social politics, the contemporary conjuncture, cultural studies, decolonisation and feminism. Beginning with a discussion on her experience of Covid, it contextualises these reflections through a discussion of anti-welfarism and the scapegoating of dependency, drawing from her new book *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*. It moves on to discuss different forms and experiences of feminism: including the neoliberal Anglo-German academic context; the legacies of queer theory and radical feminism; the ‘mud-slinging’ of social media which ‘does not allow us the time and space to rehearse what is really going on’; the need to engage with social policy alongside cultural theory; and the ongoing intersectional work of rewriting the curriculum.

Keywords

cultural studies, feminism, neoliberalism, resilience, welfare

JL: You’re recovering from ‘Long Covid’. Early on in your recovery, you wrote a powerful piece about your experience, arguing that in the pandemic there has surfaced ‘a sense that civil society has re-discovered itself during this great absence of leadership and its indifference to suffering’. What are your thoughts on pandemic culture now? (McRobbie, 2020a)

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AM: I wrote that first blog article for Verso during the very first days of the pandemic in the United Kingdom. PPE was as basic as one could imagine: a plastic apron and a disposable mask, of the type we are all now wearing, and sometimes less than that. I was immediately fearful that I would pass on the virus to the staff treating me. About 95% of the staff across all levels were Black British or British Asian, that is, from ethnic minorities. The women cleaning the ward through the night, those coming in with food trays during the day, and those coming in to check my heart, and oxygen, and blood pressure were most probably all on low rates of pay.

They were doing absolutely vital jobs. But it struck me with piercing clarity that these low-paid jobs tending to very ill people – whether by serving them food or giving them a wash-down – rarely received the respect and recognition they deserved. And this long-hours work was among the most overlooked and poorly recompensed occupations, often carried out by ethnic minority women of all ages, many of whom would go home to their families to take over duties as mother and as home-schoolers in their off-duty hours. So my key thought at that time was: surely we must have a massive re-consideration of this kind of work. This in fact is also where I ended up in the book I had just completed, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*. The logic of the post-Fordist path which Britain had pursued, and which gathered pace from the mid 1990s, was to grow the service sector at the same time as it was simultaneously being casualised, outsourced and made superficially flexible to meet the ‘needs’ of women with maternal responsibilities. Britain has, in Europe, the largest percentage of working mothers active in the labour market. In many respects, this can be seen as an achievement for the degree of economic independence this brings. But what it means in reality is that there are armies of women up and down the country – especially mothers in their forties and over – whose only option is the work available in this new de-regulated service sector. This includes, for example, packing and packaging in fulfilment centres for companies like Sports Direct; or working in the care sector; and there is also retail, which for older women tends to mean checkout work at supermarkets. And so for mothers of several children living in poor conditions with long journeys to work and with few in-house opportunities for upskilling (because of sub-contracting) there is what I referred to as a ‘triple female incarceration effect’. First, there is the media-shaming effect, where the working-class mother without qualifications is seen as a failure, and this becomes a label which is difficult to dislodge; then there is the fact that in the jobs that *are* available, there are few opportunities for promotion, day release or career development; and finally wider opportunities are also reduced, further education and other equivalent training are fee-based, and adult education has been starved of funds for decades.

Employers need to be compelled to offer in-house upskilling schemes, day-release schemes, and more and better vocational training. I would like to see the women working as cleaners to be able to have paid hours off to study. Everything

has been worsened by the end of the ‘social wage’: that is, provisions in-kind which lessen the cost for reproduction on individuals – usually women – such as after-school care, well-organised youth clubs, Saturday schools, leisure centres, libraries and community centres. And of course, with sub-contracting and agency work, the contractor has no obligations whatsoever.

In the early days of the pandemic, little was known of ‘Long Covid’. At one point, I realised my neck muscles were so weak I had to lift my head off the cushion if I was reclining on a chair. I had to seek out respiratory physiotherapy, which I’m still doing once a week for 30 minutes by Zoom with a one-to-one physiotherapist. There is nothing like this available on the NHS¹ and so I have been paying. It has been the single most significant thing that has helped me over this long period, but only the fortunate can afford such a vital medical resource. The NHS provides pamphlets and the British Lung Foundation does fantastic work, but as a Long Covid patient, what I most needed was a teacher at the other end of the Zoom camera taking me through different exercises every week. It’s a similar story with restorative yoga, for which I found some free and some paid classes. These are care professions requiring vast amounts of training and knowledge, and an advanced economy needs to invest in these sorts of services, for Long Covid patients and beyond.

Your most recent book, Feminism and the Politics of Resilience, theorises changing welfare cultures and shows how anti-welfarism has reduced the scope for feminist solidarity. It highlights the different subject positions women have been incited to adopt in relation to welfare: including the scapegoating of dependency, mothers being encouraged to multitask and young women instructed to ‘be resilient’. The book argues against nostalgia for welfare states past and for a ‘productive, reproductive and reparative’ approach. Can you outline what such an approach might entail?

In *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*, I establish a connection between the range of disciplinary techniques which have been developed, within the frames of contemporary neoliberal rationalities, in order to ‘shore up’ and mobilise normative femininities. This happens when gender becomes the site of more fluid and less certain positionalities. I also wanted to show how those enticements in popular culture to ‘celebrate’ neoliberal leadership-feminism (female success in the boardroom) are part and parcel of a wide repertoire of dividing practices. The constant invoking of female success has inscribed within it a negative interpellation effect: just as it endorses women’s empowerment, so too does it punish failure. And when this kind of figuration process looks ‘downwards’ towards working-class women, it articulates directly with an anti-welfare ethos. The disadvantaged woman is depicted across the right-wing tabloid press and in various TV genres in abject terms. She is someone who is reliant on the state; who has made ‘the wrong choices’ in life; has had too many children. This is all kaleidoscoped into the frame of an unkempt and ‘poor’ appearance. There is so much

cruelty and symbolic violence in the poverty-shaming genre of popular reality TV, and such vernacular forms are a key channel through which the undoing of the ideals of a welfare society have been conducted.

The function of the dividing activities within the feminine genres is to refute the likelihood of class solidarity. The female subject is repeatedly addressed as if to consider herself a kind of project-in-making. If the right-wing popular press such as *The Daily Mail* or *The Sun* typically foregrounds the white, welfare-dependent woman as exemplifying a whole field of social ills, there is a subtext which extends this slur so that 'she' is also implicitly Black.

Drawing on Robbie Shilliam's, and of course Gail Lewis's work, I remind readers that the post-war flowering of British welfare which permitted the so-called 'age of affluence' to emerge by means of the family or social wage was mythical when viewed from the perspective of race. The recently-arrived Windrush Black migrant population and those who came from India and Pakistan were pushed into jobs unprotected by workplace entitlements, and this exclusion from the social contract extended to housing, to education, and to the criminal justice system, as has been well documented by so many Black scholars. Therefore, when I propose a return to a welfare society that is productive, reproductive, and reparative, I am envisaging a new social imaginary which delivered universal entitlements in and out of work and for future generations. Across political culture, left and right, there has been a consensus that cuts to welfare are more or less irreversible – that the word 'generous' is only used to criticise a system of 'handouts'! So my main point was to reverse, to repair, and to offer reparation to those sectors of the population that have been excluded from what were deemed 'universal' provisions. I would like to see a debate take place as to how this could be realised. The idea of reparative funds to, for example, Windrush populations need not be a utopian fantasy.

You've spent a lot of time in Germany. What do you think are some of the key differences between the UK and Germany in terms of these cultures of feminisms and welfare?

Most of the time that I've been working in Germany in the last 3 years has been dedicated to an AHRC three-city study of fashion micro-enterprises in London, Berlin, and Milan. I've assembled a great team in Berlin of designers, fashion academics and policy-makers. This also connects with the welfare question because the argument that has emerged is that it is the existence of a social wage which permits small creative enterprises to function, where there is support and subsidy for rent of studio space and equipment, and a huge number of courses for upskilling and for further training. Germany is the land of free at-the-point-of-delivery vocational education. The social democratic heritage, even as it is being transformed, remains pretty intact. And since fashion is a female-led field, these provisions benefit the context of women's employment.

But inside academia, I observe timidity on so many issues, and cadres of women scholars who feel they have no option but to toe the line. There is also little risk-taking with the wilder edges of academic topics: when it comes to the hiring process, it's so often the safe white male scholar who gets the job. The German academy may, now and again, look to the likes of Paul Gilroy or Stuart Hall or Saidiya Hartman; and there is a new generation of Black German feminist scholars and writers, who are producing fantastic work and who are very active on Twitter, and who do seem poised to have the confrontations that are so overdue. But Black, Turkish German and ethnic minority scholars seem quite isolated; and often they have already completed their doctoral studies in the United Kingdom (at Goldsmiths, for example) or in the United States. I am thinking of my own former PhD student Onur Kömürçü, and Jana Cattien who completed her work on race in the German context at SOAS, and in Germany itself there is the writing of Denise Bergold-Caldwell in Marburg and Teresa Koloma Beck at Hamburg.

Your work is profoundly connected to queer theory. You've also talked (in an interview from a few years back in Cultural Studies) about your involvement in radical feminist groups at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and what they generated (training for non-traditional work, e.g. car maintenance, women-only discos) and curtailed ('Endless rules were also drafted about who could write about what topic'. . . 'denunciations of those who liaised with men, or indeed who had given birth to boys'). What are the different legacies of queer and radical feminism for and in your work? (McRobbie, 2013).

It's all the more difficult to answer because it traverses so many decades of my career and my personal involvement in feminist politics. And it's funny because although I look back at the times in the late 1970s and through the 1980s of angry arguments between different feminist groups, as I grow older I really want to walk away from this angry way of doing politics – which of course is intensified with social media, especially via Twitter. I feel the kind of mud-slinging we are exposed to obfuscates the issues, and does not allow us the time and space to rehearse what is really going on. It often feels that there is a too rapid sense of closure around issues that would benefit from a slower, more reflective mode of debate. And while I personally am willing to speak out on this or that platform, my skills and my expertise are in the classroom or sitting round a seminar table. At the same time, in each of these locations, the public platform and the university classroom, when there are issues at stake that pertain to, for example, Black women feeling they are not being addressed in the curriculum, or not being listened to, I'm absolutely sure that it is imperative that 'white women listen', as Hazel Carby put it back in Birmingham in the early 1980s.

I think (as was the case for so many of us) reading Judith Butler's early work had such a profound impact on me. I loved the way it took hold of all those elements of feminist theory where they had, as I recall, reached a bit of an impasse. This was back in the late 1980s. Marxist-feminist theory had gone so far with

domestic labour and psychoanalytical feminism had got stuck with its more or less wholesale endorsing of Lacan, which inexorably led to a sexually conservative position on family life and the need for a 'real mother' and a 'real father'. It's easy to forget how embedded these principles were within the influential field of Lacanian feminism, especially in France.

So Butler's two books came at me like a burst of thunder, and with such a force of sheer intellectual energy. They managed to achieve so many breakthroughs, paving the way to developing better understandings of normative femininity and masculinity and persisting with such intensive readings of Freud and Lacan until they were able to answer some of the most pressing questions about lesbian desire, heterosexual melancholy, the Oedipus complex and the reproduction of normative heterosexual family life, boldly contesting Lacan with the idea of the phallic lesbian.

These works impacted on me in my academic work as a sociologist since I could see that they could be used to understand the repetitive crafting through which girls come to recognise themselves as such, and the violence this entails. There was always a psychosocial element which allowed for a translation from psychoanalysis to feminist political philosophy to sociology. There was something so profound about how Butler understood queerness, not as identity, but as fluidity and irregularity; as a repeated subversion of norms which had an accumulative force, an achievement of power through so many re-significations. There is both an openness in this kind of articulation and the capacity for so many alliances, or the contingency of the chain of equivalence, as Laclau and Mouffe would put it. It is all the more ironic, then, that the seemingly deliberate mis-readings (or non-reading, in the proper sense) of Butler by particular journalists have led to such hyperbolic antagonisms.

What would you like to see work that identifies as 'cultural studies' doing - are there directions that you think it should be taking that it isn't? I was struck by how at a recent event for example you mentioned that work would benefit from connecting more to social policy. (This also reminds me that I often wonder whether a better term for cultural studies might be 'cultural politics').

Yes, you are right, I have been gesturing towards forging better links between cultural studies and the fields of social policy and criminology. This arises out of the sheer power now attributed to all things media and screen-related and to the dominating effect that popular culture has on our everyday lives. For example, if the media demonises, belittles or scapegoats single mothers reliant on some forms of welfare or the benefit system, and if these women come to be typecast according to certain codes of what is deemed to be 'failed femininity', then we need also be more informed about how these stereotypes function at ground level. For this, we need to turn to feminist criminology and social policy to look at how, for example, women on benefits perceive themselves, how they internalise these media stereotypes, and find ways of refusing them or negotiating around them.

Of course, there is research that has joined these two universes, such as Bev Skeggs' wonderful work, but I think it's important to create more active dialogues with social policy for the reason that the welfare society (and its demise) is at its core. Likewise, how is it possible to work in social policy without seeing the need for media and cultural theory? Chapter 3 of *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*, on women and welfare, was prompted by Stuart Hall's discussion of George Osborne (the former Chancellor of the Exchequer in the United Kingdom) describing people 'sleeping off a life on benefits'. So many of those political phrases were actually composed by speechwriters drafted in from tabloid newspapers like *The Sun*.

When I made the comment about working more closely with colleagues in criminology and social policy at our recent PhD event this was also prompted by how so many of the papers presented by students traversed these two domains (McRobbie, 2020b). For example, when looking at the entrepreneurial activity of young women on Instagram (the 'Dubai influencers') and the issue of whether or not this constitutes sex work or simply lifestyle modelling, I was suggesting a shift out of the technological emphasis on digital labour in terms of algorithms and 'likes' towards the socio-legal terrain. I also thought this was a way younger feminist media and cultural scholars could themselves bring some fresh energy to challenge the mainstream of these fields. I was glad to see that this kind of cross-fertilisation was already taking place. The whole debate about sex work and indeed issues about the new sites used for porn such as OnlyFans requires close feminist academic scrutiny – especially with *Daily Mail* celebrities moving in and out of working for OnlyFans during the pandemic.

We're obviously a very different moment from that of CCCS, but do you think there are any key lessons you think we can take from it for the present?

I think most of us who were at the CCCS or who were working alongside Stuart Hall have taken their own narratives from those experiences and it has shaped how we function inside the university system. The idea of doing conjunctural research which interweaves between different levels of the society – the political, the economic and the cultural – is so ingrained as to hardly need to be stated. However, that's still a methodology which is anathema to mainstream sociology, and it has always been the marker of difference between the two fields. For many years, sociologists took absolute umbrage against Stuart and those of us associated with this kind of work: we were deemed absolutely unsociological. Actually, I am most comfortable with the versions of CCCS and of cultural studies which emphasise the dialogic value of pedagogy, of being inside the teaching machine. Stuart himself was 'lit up' by the connection he always forged between research and teaching. In effect in the early days he would be writing articles like 'The Determination of the News Photograph', while also teaching many of the foundational texts on which it was based.

Of course, we can and should contest the excessive demands made on us as teachers by the neoliberal university, but the chance we have to work on and teach topics that are so much of the present and which also require that we bring to bear on those topics the tools which cultural studies has bequeathed us (structure of feeling, the theory of ideology, the politics of meaning, interpellation, performativity, the society of control, etc.) is endlessly rewarding. And it is funny how there is often a circularity. Althusser's idea of interpellation is half a century old but it can suddenly bounce back right into the feminist classroom when a young Black woman student rightly poses to me questions about that hailing process. For all the ideological harm interpellation laboured to impose by means of its subjectivising process, and the naturalisation of modes of quiescent femininity it sought to secure (such as via the front page of the girls or women's magazine), at the same time issued a violent *exclusion* from that same harmful terrain, by means of consolidating dominant whiteness, and furthering processes of long-standing Black invisibilisation. There remains so much to be done here by questioning these subject positions and their psychospatial logics – that 'turning around' movement, as Butler describes in *The Psychic Life of Power*. This leads us of course to Fanon, and also to Sara Ahmed and Saidiya Hartman as we seek to re-write the curriculum. So many thanks to those fantastic first year BA Black female students at Goldsmiths.

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Note

1. The NHS is the National Health Service, the United Kingdom's publicly funded healthcare system.

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Biographical Notes

Jo Littler is an editor of *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Her books include *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'*, ed with Roshi Naidoo (2004), *Against Meritocracy* (2018), *The Care Manifesto* (2020) (with the Care Collective) and a forthcoming book of interviews with feminist academics.

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