TOP GIRLS NO MORE? FEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM-UK, AND BEYOND[1]

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***Coils of the Serpent* kindly invited me to reflect back on almost two decades of post-feminism, neoliberalism and the various new waves of popular feminism.**

In the corridors of Goldsmiths College in the early 2000s I noticed posters inviting young women to apply for jobs in the lap-dancing clubs which at that time were so numerous in central London. They were being promoted as fun forms of adult entertainment, no longer seedy or off limits. I also saw some scouts out and about in the college cafes leafleting for pole dancers. I wondered about the lack of discussion of this phenomenon. I called the Women's Officer in the Students Union. They took note but the idea of a debate never happened. Inside my own classrooms there was a noisy disavowal of feminism, as if it was an unpleasant thing that belonged firmly in the past. One film which I screened at the time and discussed was *Closer* directed by Mike Nicholls with Natalie Portman as 'Alice' (not, as it later transpires, her real name), a US student filling in some time in London as a lap dancer in one of these same clubs[2]. This was a narrative of middle-class young professionals. Beautiful and educated, the implication was that she, Alice, had made an active choice to earn money in the sex industry; there was no hint of being a victim or of being there through having no viable alternatives. In the course of the film's narrative sexuality was construed as a transactional encounter with all partners seemingly equal and free to negotiate their desires, from the doctor Larry, played by Clive Owen, accessing cybersex chat rooms during down time at the hospital, to the not-so-successful journalist Dan, played by Jude Law. Their entanglements did not make for pain-free relationships, betrayal and lies were unavoidable, but youth, beauty and a sense of adventure conveyed the idea of equality in intimacy. Young women in their early 20s during this time in urban metropolitan culture were expected to be 'up for it'.

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[1] I would like to thank Birkbeck College London, Institute for the Humanities in 2020 and the University of Lisbon in 2023 for inviting me to give early versions of this essay.

[2] *Closer*, 2004, film from the original stage play by Patrick Marber.

Feminism was, as Amia Srinivasan puts it, 'deeply unsexy' (Srinivasan 2021). She also notes with some retrospective apologies, that in the philosophy classroom in her own Ivy League under-graduate times, feminist theory and gender studies were regarded as below par, not sufficiently rigorous. The full aspirational neoliberal effect could therefore be witnessed in these various classrooms on the part of the young women who considered that they had no need for feminism, and that with hard work and ambition they could become 'top girls'. For middle-class young women or upwardly aspirational girls from working class families, what I had described as the 'female individualisation process' was considered sufficient to permit a seemingly smooth pathway into the world of jobs, careers and relationships. But the new social contract that I discussed in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (translated into German by Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa) subsequently proved to be utterly worthless (McRobbie 2008, 2010). It fell apart in its complete avoidance of a whole range of issues: rape, violence, workplace harassment, and consent, even though it took some time, a decade or so, for this to become something that could be widely acknowledged. Once young women entered the world of work they suddenly encountered 'everyday sexism'. The university years, though not without their own incidents, had provided some time and space of exception. These same young women were then fully exposed to the misogyny of the Trump years, and with this the rise and ubiquitousness of internet porn. This was a nightmarish reality especially, it seemed, for those who, protected by solid middle-class status, had assumed themselves to be unimpeded as 'top girls' for whom 'female success' was a deserved outcome for the hard work. That idea of assumed equality quickly fell apart when women began to talk about their experiences on the streets, when attention was turned to male violence, and especially in London following the brutal kidnap and murder of Sarah Everard in 2021, during lockdown when the streets were empty, at the hands of a London Met serving police officer. And in the UK, in the last decade, certainly more so than in Germany, prominent women in all walks of life regularly receive violent threats and misogynist abuse. Many female MPs have had to be moved out of their homes and provided with police protection. There was a kind of shock effect as women became more and more exposed to the vitriol, hatred and misogyny that flooded the internet. These experiences, after decades of doing without feminism, or of disavowing feminism, paved the way for the angry outbursts of popular feminism. Arguably we are still paying the cost for those years of feminist abeyance.

During the early years of post-feminism, there was an ethos promoted by the UK New Labour government that there was no longer any need for anti-racist politics; multi-culturalism and affirmative action policies had gone too far. Issues of discrimination could instead be channeled into 'multi-cultural managerialism' and Sara Ahmed investigated the new landscape of institutional diversity policies (Ahmed 2012). Young black and Asian British women could be encouraged to join with their white peers and leap onto the ladder of opportunity and aim for female success. At that time,

again in the classroom, I observed a decreasing interest in race and politics, and the absence of a new generation of black and Asian intellectuals to follow in the footsteps of the likes of Gilroy, hooks, Hall, Mercer, Bhabha and others. Many of us feminist scholars had always had leading black feminists on the cultural studies and sociology curricula – Spivak, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Angela Davis and in the UK Lola Young, Ann Phoenix, Hazel V. Carby – but there was a generational gap. Who was coming up through the ranks?

Drawing on Stuart Hall's neo-Marxist methodology of conjunctural analysis (a kind of historical sociology) and over the course of the two books spanning 12 years (*The Aftermath of Feminism*, 2008, and *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*, 2020) I investigated the distinct pathways for how the political economy of neoliberalism in the UK addressed women and especially young women as 'luminous subjects of attention'. Stuart Hall wrote about how the idea of 'middle-classness' was of key importance to the neoliberal project (Hall 2011). Middle-classness invoked a homogenous vocabulary of female success, excellence and aspiration. This was consolidated by the plan to bring more young people into the university system with the expansion of places for degree level courses now available to more than 50% of the school-leaving population. With so many more young women entering the university for the three years of degree level study, this qualification came to function as a new and seemingly egalitarian promise of middle-class status.

But in the cultural sphere this seeming expansion of opportunities entailed a simultaneous disparaging of working-class women and girls. In the tabloid press and in popular primetime quality TV there was often a disparaging of poor and unemployed women, especially those deemed incapable of being improved or 'made over'. Far from this being a harmless joke, it was a key feature of the neoliberal agenda of anti-welfarism since working-class women, dating back to Bill Clinton's 1996 pledge to get rid of 'welfare as we know it' (invoking the racist stereotype of the welfare queen), were typically envisaged as too reliant on welfare, as having children out of wedlock, and thus of being morally deficit. There was a marked withdrawal of compassion. Few public figures dared to suggest that the welfare state might be more generous; the consensus was that it needed to be slimmed down at the very least, and that its very existence encouraged people to become dependent on 'hand outs'. Working-class and disadvantaged women were targeted as a convenient scapegoat and those who did not measure up provided a good reason to reduce welfare spending.

Stuart Hall's writing is helpful because it stretches back to his pathbreaking analysis of Thatcherism in the UK from the mid-1980s (Hall 1988). Even before then with *Policing the Crisis* Hall examined how the popular media, i.e. the local conservative press, played an agenda-setting role in advance of political culture by keeping close to the

ground and attuned to everyday life. Using vernacular language and popular phrases it was the conservative tabloid press that was able to build up a popular constituency for what Hall later called 'the great moving right show' (Hall et al. 1978; Hall 1988). Small grievances and judgements based on racial stereotypes could be tapped into. There are connections here between that early work and the subsequent analyses of neoliberalism by Hall, myself and by Wendy Brown (Hall 2011; Brown 2015; McRobbie 2008, 2020). In the US context Brown reflected on the retraction of the state and the abandonment of welfare, and the ensuing privatisation of everyday life so that the family must now shoulder the full burden of its own social reproduction and how it is encouraged to do this through it being addressed as if it was a business looking for a 'return on investment' with children, in our case here, the girls, becoming items of 'human capital'. My own work investigated the 'female individualisation process', competition, enterprise and self-responsibilisation as against older feminist ideals of co-operation, welfare, equality and the public good. As Foucault had put it, this was now about a 'society of inequality' (Foucault 2006). But how did this tally with the idea of aspirational and respectable women being in effect selected as subjects for preferred attention and support? Is this not a contradiction? Arguably women became designated agents of change. They were in effect subjects ripe for the individualisation process, for having new norms of self-hood conferred on them.

Across these two books I focused on two key moments of this unfolding neoliberal rationality, the decade of the New Labour government 1997-2007 and its distinctive address to young women, and then the 2008-2018 moment which saw the return of feminism bursting onto the world stage with protests and demonstrations through #me-too, the women's marches against Trump, the BLM movement and the prominent place of black feminism. This posed a question for those institutions charged with maintaining the status quo, with ensuring that female consumers would continue to buy into the ideals of femininity and that shareholders would receive their annual windfalls. How could this new feminism be effectively managed? This was a new dilemma for capitalism and its consumer culture. In the past feminist politics had been restricted to a small minority but this new wave threatened something much bigger. Was there scope for the idea of a neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2018)? What kind of feminism might be tolerable?

Post-feminism coincided with the period 1997-2007 and it was the term I used to understand a novel form of modern governmentality directed towards young women which allowed New Labour, led by Tony Blair, to dissociate itself from the old leftist and social democratic values of the 70s and 80s and deliver something new. Feminism now belonged in the past; having once perhaps had a role to play, it was no longer needed. Instead the 'female individualisation process' would allow young women to self-manage their lives. The popular media was full of stories about female success, suggesting girls

were now equal. The government alongside the popular media were there to offer young women a 'new sexual contract': do well at school, work hard, enjoy the sexual freedoms like their male counterparts and be active as consumer citizens, all of which came with a downplaying of politics, which could be left to the professionals in government, what Antony Barnett called the 'corporate populism' of the Blair agenda (Barnett 2000). The post-feminist masquerade was a key concept in this work, a figuration and a composite of types. Based on the insights of psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1929/1986) and Butler (1990) I argued that there was a façade of equality by the late 1990s, but the conditions of this were that young women always had to be pleasing, sweet, even childlike when they were occupying high-level positions in work – like the lawyer in the US TV series *Ally McBeal*, they had to affect a sweet little girly 'cute' femininity. This in effect reduced their threat; they had to playfully deflect from their own power in the workplace by exaggerating their femininity, their fashion choices, the vulnerability of their super high heels etc. It was important that no one was forcing them into this, they were not slaves of fashion, they were doing this post-feminist masquerade as a 'personal choice', also a signal that their disposable income gave them a sense of empowerment. Carrie in *Sex in the City* was the most prominent of this new typing of womanhood, especially where she insists on wearing a 'silly hat' even when her date is not impressed. This thematic also dominated the narrative of the newspaper column/book/film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, especially one scene at work where she self-consciously wears a super short skirt to work as a way of attracting her boss in the publishing house while her own inner monologue reminds her that feminists would disapprove of her or scold her for this. The masquerade was theorised by Riviere as a way in which women, when they achieve a senior position in the workplace and seemingly occupy an equal place alongside men, feel they must reassure men that they are not such a threat. When they have made an important contribution in professional life they will draw attention to their womanliness with make up or hair or outfit so as to perform this act of reassurance, but at the same time there is some degree of repressed anger having to put their male counterparts at ease. The post-feminist masquerade appears to celebrate the achievement of equality while at the same time emphasising feminine frailty, sweetness and endearment. She can remain a 'silly girl'. It meant over-doing femininity in the workplace to avoid being seen as a threat to the status quo. This fitted well within the more commercial media entertainment sector. For sure this figuration also carried connotations as if 'for white women only'. At the time I argued indeed that practiced frailty and the stance of (white) femininity that allowed for (white) male chivalry was inherently a racialised phenomenon. The history of slavery did not allow black women to affect this practised weakness or what is nowadays referred to as 'white women's tears' since there was no man whose masculinity would be enhanced by coming to their rescue.

The second figuration of post-feminism/anti-feminism was the 'phallic girl'. This too referenced but refuted feminism as no longer needed. This young woman had become

'one of the boys' and with the end of the double standard and the era of sexual freedom won by the previous generation of feminists she could enjoy these freedoms. She could party all night, carry a hip flask of whisky (the media then dubbed these young women Ladettes, i.e. like the 'lads'). She could fall down drunk on the street and have casual sex with impunity. She was the archetypal 'cool girl' of the early 2000s, most often found in the world of the popular music industry and described fondly as 'feisty'. She was never complaining about the bad behaviour of the guys. Various women DJs in the UK fitted this idea of female phallicism. And of course there was Amy Winehouse. She too refused any kind of feminist stance. This is not to say that feminism would have saved her, but in the male-dominated music industry her addictions were buoyed up with a kind of macho bravado ('They tried to make me go to rehab, but I said no, no, no') underpinned by a kind of fatalistic melancholic femininity. Following Butler a political discourse like feminism had to be given up for the sake of her 'success' in the patriarchal music industry. Any idea of feminism could only be preserved melancholically. But how does her life and death look now through the lens of contemporary feminism? To what extent was there a mythologising of her vulnerability?[3] What about black girls and ethnic minority young women? As mentioned above excluded from these figurations they could neither assume the mantle of fragile femininity to disguise their achievements, nor could they risk phallicism on the streets, or in public venues for fear of aggressive racism and over-reactive policing. In a time of anti-anti-racism (sometimes called post-racism) the female individualisation process carried its own requirements of black and Asian woman. Arguably what was established in the press media and in popular culture as well as in political life was an updated version of the 'respectability and uplift' mode of racialised governmentality. A longstanding historical feature of the post-slavery and post-colonial management of women, they were urged to set aside any anger at perceived inequality, to work exceptionally hard, and to adhere to strong family values. In popular film and TV black and Asian girls were always on the sideline, perhaps in the background, as part of the larger entourage of 'girlfriends'[4].

There was another figuration however which extended the logic of neoliberalism for notional diversity. The international editions of a range of young women's magazines *Elle Japan* for example, or *Vogue China*, *Vogue India*, or *Marie-Claire Brazil* and so on created a composite type of the 'global girl'. This was a version of a familiar colonialist trope which envisages a pleasing, eager young woman who bears no grudges about past injustices, who will buy into the values of Western globalisation and its consumer culture. How these magazines defined the parameters of this content and the editorial direction requires more extensive magazine research. This figuration emphasises, above

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[3] Recently music producer for Amy Winehouse Mark Ronson reflected that perhaps more could have been done to help her.

[4] A black female lead character remained unlikely as long as there were so few black women scriptwriters and editors.

all, the allure of the capitalist consumer culture's fashion and beauty complex. The post-feminist inflection comes with a promise of freedom rehearsed through, once again, glamourous decorative middle-class femininity brought into a direct articulation with success in work and in professional life. The pleasing demeanour betrays the motif of colonial subservience.

Eventually these three figurations fall apart. They are overtaken by events. A rupture has taken place, and there is a desire for feminism. Young women have been sold short and what had been a suppressed 'illegible rage' becomes fully legible. With Hall, Butler and Derrida we could say that in so avidly and repetitively pushing feminism away in repudiating it, it retained nevertheless a haunting presence; many of these young women knew about it, even as they disavowed it. That which haunts retains some power to be resurrected, it has the possibility to come back to life. It has had a shadowy existence and is therefore within hailing distance. The illegible rage with its attendant melancholy which Butler argued registered as a 're-casting of social plaint as psychic self-judgement' eventually finds expression in a new highly articulate politics of fury, anger, protest and activism (Butler 1997). This is now the terrain for urgent analysis and for the generation of new concepts.

The challenges to the gendered hierarchies find one quite immediate response on the part of the powerful with Sheryl Sandberg's (2012) *Lean In* volume which sees the COO of Facebook endorse feminism wholeheartedly, while also drafting the contours of a feminism that would not be disruptive, that was not predicated on rage (Rottenberg 2018). This is an updated form of US (primarily white) liberal feminism or what I labelled in 2020 'neoliberal leadership feminism' which proposes at its core the figuration of the busy professional young mother. Sandberg's encouragement to women to smile as they leant in towards the boardroom and without removing themselves to the outer circles with the onset of motherhood, bore some residues of the post-feminist masquerade. The feminist element was recast as a determination to remain in well-paid employment after having children and not to retreat to the less-demanding roles. This new brand of leadership-feminism could flourish without upsetting or disturbing the existing workplace male-dominated culture. Hence the smiles. Sandberg's neoliberal leadership-feminism refrained from any critique of the status quo in work and employment, she did not ask for child-care policies, or for flexible hours. And this was for middle-class women only, since words like hardship or low pay, never mind poverty, made no appearance. Only an executive salary would allow women to buy in help so that time would be freed up for the gym and for quality time with girlfriends. A sleek toned body, a tasteful home, agreeable husband or partner of the same sex – this contemporary idyll of middle-class white life was all about careful planning and about applying a spreadsheet mentality to the weekly schedule. From a UK perspective this fantasy of the family unit was one well primed for the neoliberal times, with the

hollowing out of the provisions and services that had been part of the previous social democratic administrative state. The self-help mantra of *Lean In* was by 2012 (and in the light of the financial crisis of 2008) less persuasive for the vast majority of women. There were no references at all to such things as public libraries, youth centres, or nursery care in Sandberg's account. The new working mother would not complain about drudgery as feminists did in the past. The family was to be run like a corporation with the mother as CEO. But as a fantasy it reverberated, and this is why it counts as a figuration. It filtered down through the home and lifestyle magazines, signaling a kind of perfect, affluent, carefully managed family life.

How does the capitalist consumer culture face up to the new feminism? What initiatives are undertaken inside the companies to develop strategies for this new scenario of popular feminism? Studying the magazines and other popular media over the course of several months suggested a triage of concepts with the first leading to the second and then to the third (P-I-R). The best option for consumer culture was to acknowledge that the 'perfect' life and self-image it had so advocated over the decades could, in a sort of gesture to the new feminism, introduce a note of realism with the idea of the 'imperfect'. This allowed a relaxation of the rules. But still the grid and the swings between one and the other did not quite align with the new feminist anger. The third idea of 'resilience' sat more comfortably with a feminist ethos. The female subject could learn to be more resilient. ('We judge ourselves too harshly'.) With falling sales of magazines, of products, of the whole world of fashion and beauty, since the new feminism brings all of this paraphernalia into question, the figuration of the 'resilient girl' is adaptive, a working compromise for a perhaps spooked consumer culture. A way of coping with the reality of the feminist anger is urgently required. Magazines like *Grazia* find editorial pathways through this new terrain. Resilience-training marks out a milieu for the managing of feminism. It refers to a process of self-governance that inevitably comes close to Berlant's 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011).

A further defining feature for neoliberal global governance is the casting of the girl and woman in the role of a hyper-charged agent for productivity and economic growth. This takes a particular inflection for the global south. As Amia Srinivasan points out many of the ideas about girls and young women in the developing world being singled out for support programmes were the outcome of the Beijing Women's Conference led by a group of powerful women such as Hilary Clinton with an avowedly feminist agenda (Srinivasan 2021). Western liberal feminism was to become something that would become part of so many aid projects. This was under-girded by the couplet of education and work, with young women posited as superior moral agents, worthy of investment. As part of the fight against poverty and malnutrition the various campaigns which have followed have repeated this idea of championing women. Kalpana Wilson has tracked these programmes as they are aligned with the prevailing neoliberal agenda (Wilson

2015). What became known as the 'girl effect' was built on a distinct set of practices: a) women and micro finance, b) population biopolitics and c) the girl as the ideal agent leading to programmes like 'Gender Equality as Smart Economics'. All of these together propose the idea of the 'development girl'.

Here there is an immediately obvious re-working of old stereotypes that women will work harder, that they are 'passive and amenable', that they show moral agency. What is more novel in the programmes is the focus on entrepreneurship rather than on, for example, social work, or education and health care. If anything there is an intensification of work, so that, judging from the available material, the young women in question might be working a 14-16-hour day. The girl emerges as a 'vehicle for investment', but beyond the glossy brochures and promotional material, little is known about the actual implementation of these programmes. Sponsorship and other commercial interests mean that the workforces are bound by rules of confidentiality. It is hard to find any social science accounts or ethnographies of the inner workings of the many projects run by the major agencies, such as *The Girl Effect*, *Because I'm a Girl* or *Plan International*. This in itself is indicative of the neoliberal turn. More directly run government programmes in the past such as EU Social Funds and overseas projects always required periodic and interim reports and evaluations and other extensive accountability documentation made publicly available and able to feed into the wider community of policymakers, academics and others. This current 'girl effect' follows a different course with a new vocabulary. If she makes 'wise choices', she might succeed. The keyword is always 'empowerment'. Some argue that this is primarily about the creation of new markets (Banet-Weiser 2018). But there are a range of other elements, not least of which is the presence of the brands in place of long established and perhaps more democratically accountable charities and NGOs. Of course it would be illuminating to see sociological research undertaken on these new players, on the various agencies and institutions such as the Melinda Gates Foundation, looking at how they operate from top levels of management to the local neighbourhoods and communities. Despite the glossy brochures there is in fact relatively little to be gleaned from the currently available materials.

The idea of 'figuration' indicates an expansive and flexible field of containment, a narrativized and embodied space of demarcated agency for young women, a kind of activating force. This stands in contrast to the more fiercely restrictive and oppressive racializing stereotype (Bhabha 1986). Figuration is a category for making changes that are to be brought into alignment through processes of articulation with a range of other political, economic and cultural determinants. The racialising stereotype relies on a constant repetitive process of fixing, of knowledge production about the other. If one is underpinned by the assumed agency of western freedoms, the other is about coercion and control. With the transposition of the values of the new western corporate-

sponsored feminism to the body of the 'development girl', she belongs (precariously) to the category of the figuration that is nonetheless reliant on residual features of the stereotype. The novelty of this figuration is that it marks out the terrain of global capital boldly using 'neoliberal leadership feminism' and the idea of girlhood for specific outcomes. In this field of activity indigenous feminism, and the many diverse feminisms of the global south which highlight debt, and the divisive strategies of the female success model, are almost totally sidelined.

Current Dilemmas of 'Authoritarian Populism' and Feminism

The discussion so far has moved across topics which relate to young women with particular reference to the course of the neoliberal pathway that was inaugurated during the Thatcher era but which took on an energetic ideological life during the times of the New Labour government. This period also oversaw the dismantling of so many institutions and services that had been entrenched features of the post-war welfare state. To legitimate this process culture and the popular media were called upon to play a key role. But in the last decade various events that have borne an aggressively misogynistic agenda have unleashed waves of anger and mass protest spearheaded by young women for whom feminism in a range of different forms has emerged as an urgent political necessity. There are so many issues arising, many more than can be encompassed here. Let me then offer, by way of a conclusion, the direction that emerging feminist research might usefully follow.

A) In the quality press and in media institutions like the BBC and Channel 4 there has been a sea-change in the hands of the decision-makers, especially in the commissioning editors, with the result that more adventurous black and Asian feminist programming has been made and is now available on a daily basis to wider audiences. These forms of media with their online platforms now constitute the most visible sites for the dissemination of popular feminist debate, albeit subject to editorial decision-making processes. BBC TV dramas like *I May Destroy You* provide opportunities for further analysis of 'new feminist media'.

B) At the same time there has been a proliferation of independent feminist 'zines' and online bloggers. It is here that we see applied more directly the kind of critiques of the enduring or residual stereotypes often transposed from reading and discussion in the feminist university classroom onto the various platforms such as the (sadly now defunct) *gal-dem*, the black feminist zine *Skin Deep*, the US magazine *Bitch*, the German *Missy* and many others. This is where, for example, we find essay-type reviews of popular Netflix shows which may include a single black girl (e.g. a magical-wise girl character) amidst the narrative dominance of

whiteness. There is not only critique but also an avalanche of new feminist writing and of media production and this spans such a vast array of genres that it will be the task of scholars to take stock and create new methodologies for documenting and archiving this field of feminist cultural production.

C) There is also parallel activity on the part of the forces of the far right, as well as the more mainstream right-wing political formations in the UK. The ways in which the right with its global social-media presence has engaged with the new feminisms, including appropriating elements for its own purposes, is by now well documented (Farris 2017; Hark and Villa 2020). So fierce and unrelenting is this movement that the idea of 'complexification of backlash' outlined in *The Aftermath of Feminism* is now entirely superceded (McRobbie 2008). Abortion rights revoked in the US, white feminism appropriated to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, the closure of gender studies courses and indeed of whole universities such as the Central European University formerly based in Budapest but forced to move to Vienna – these forms of anti-feminist activity are not so much backlash as a new and energetic form of far-right mobilisation. But in the UK the pernicious local form of antagonism has targeted the university with a new popular and vernacular vocabulary adopted by the right-wing tabloid press. It is the teaching-machine which has come under fire. The various media outlets pronounce their 'war on woke' and they decry the 'cancel culture' for its curbs on 'freedom of speech'. The ferocity of these campaigns, which are disguised in the tabloid press under the heading of 'news', means that on a daily basis the so-called dangers posed by gender theory and trans politics, including lurid stories and sensational reporting, are used to create moral outrage and social hysteria. But the term 'moral panic' is insufficient and outmoded in times of social media (McRobbie and Thornton 1996). One marked outcome of the attacks on so-called 'gender ideology' in the UK has been the formation of a sizable feminist common-sense lobby which has recruited global celebrities such as the writer J.K. Rowling to its ranks, joined by a number of well-known feminist journalists and a handful of academics, including those whose previous research on questions of gender was little known in the academy. Together this grouping, which has argued on an anti-trans position for the protection of safe spaces for what they understand as biologically-defined women, has accumulated the support of the wider political culture, especially the Conservative Party. On the other side of this divide the pro trans groupings, including most of the LGBTQ community, find theoretical as well as political support within the university, especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences where decades of feminist theory and gender studies have queried the idea of an essentialised womanhood. But the main point here is the high level of animosity, aggression and violence which has accompanied this now wholly polarised debate such that more measured, more open and non-violent

discussion becomes increasingly hard to imagine. On the one hand there is the seeming success of gender theory as it has broken through the boundaries that have divided the life of the university from the outside world. We might loosely call this the wide dissemination of and popularisation of 'Butler's thinking'. On the other hand those feminist groups that have disagreed (such as the radical, formerly separatist, feminists) now come within the orbit for funding and support by the far-right 'free speech lobby'. The various controversial issues that have emerged (emotive topics such as surgery, puberty blockers and de-transitioning) cannot be any longer discussed in the spirit of non-sensational, sober and open-minded exchange. The radical right has found a subtle and inflammatory way of turning feminists against each other, where the 'common-sense' voices of J.K. Rowling and her supporters consistently misconstrue and misunderstand the writing of Butler and more widely gender theory. Butler herself, in her recent public talks, consistently makes the case for alliances and of course for anti-violence and solidarity. She speaks on behalf of vulnerable minorities such as trans people. The issue for new research will include the strong involvement of the right (maybe behind the scenes and in the think-tanks) driving this aggressive edge and mounting a sustained attack on the universities through the focus on 'free speech' (Srinivasan 2023).

D) Where does this leave the onward pathway of what Hall called the 'great moving right show'? What kind of diagnosis for the present state of neoliberalism-UK would Hall have offered? Might he want to return to a neo-Marxist terminology of economic determinism 'in the last instance' as Althusser famously put it (Althusser 1971)? Has the absolute collapse in the standard of living for the majority of the UK population and especially for working-class men and women, brought about by the privatisation of formerly social resources, especially housing, exacerbated by not just Brexit but also by the spiralling of energy costs and by disastrous political leadership, pushed hardship, poverty and even hunger and destitution to the top of the political agenda, overshadowing everything else? Neoliberalism-UK has been based on the evisceration of welfare, a debt-led economy of mortgages and student loans alongside decades of wage stagnation stretching from the middle-class professions to the low-paid care sector. Now in this current post-pandemic scenario the 'top girls' mythology of equality has faded. The idea of female success rings hollow. In a context where poverty and even malnutrition and ill health are so rampant and when it is commonplace to read about NHS nurses needing to make use of foodbanks, these realities have led to a return of industrial militancy not seen in the UK since the mid-1980s. The idea of the feminist strike has become a palpable reality. Arguably the idea of 'neoliberal leadership feminism' failed to capture the imaginations in the UK of more than a tiny sector of highly privileged young women for whom the appeal of

landing a top chief executive position was already on the horizon. But this should not mean that the power of such women now occupying these kinds of top jobs should be ignored. It is this ethos that has become part of the mainstream of management studies, these ideas of success are deemed palatable across the UK political party system. What earlier on was simply liberal feminist ideals of mentorship, and supporting women to get a foothold on the ladder did become a more ambitious and highly competitive neoliberal model of women and leadership throughout the corporate world as well as in many public sector organisations including the universities.

E) We therefore need to set alongside the upsurge of strikes and the new feminism and gender politics, the reality of an embedded hard right in the UK which has crafted a so-called feminism compatible with their ideals. There would need to be more sustained analysis of papers, documents and statements from within and around the Tory-supporting think tanks to consolidate this claim. If in this paper I have pointed to the fading of credibility of the 'top girls' phenomenon we can see something of it lingering at the top of the UK current government. Two of the most prominent exemplars are from Asian backgrounds and occupy or have occupied the highest offices of state (as Home Secretary). Both Priti Patel before her and Suella Braverman (now in office) advocate for 'female success' through the mantra of hard work alongside patriotic loyalty to the British state. The ethos of the 'top girls' resides in their very success, they are exemplars and thus role models to others. Each of these women, especially in their outspoken 'authoritarian populism', their hostility to migration and their aggressive 'law and order' platforms, manifestly invoke the spirit of Margaret Thatcher.

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