Sociological Research online

Childhood, Responsibility and the Liberal Loophole: Replaying the Sex-Wars in Debates on Sexualisation?

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Sociological Research Online, 18 (2) 7
<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/2/7.html>
10.5153/sro.2770

Received: 8 May 2012 Accepted: 22 Oct 2012 Published: 31 May 2013

Abstract

Feminist media discourses on 'sexualisation' have set out a critique of sexist cultural forms in contemporary society, using the figure of the 'girl' to show how women are socialised in harmful ways. This is an ingenious move – discussing the interplay between sexism and commercialism through discourse on minors can circumvent retorts to feminist claims about the harms of sexist culture that 'well, that's her choice'. Yet such discourses also necessarily render morally problematic any expression of sexuality or desire for the female subject under discussion, since the 'girl' is understood as prior to sexual consent. Debating sexism over the bodies of 'girls' therefore has had the unintended consequence of generating a replay of the 'sex wars', a debate between different feminist camps over whether consent can be meaningful. The terrain of debates on sexualisation has also facilitated coalitions between feminist discourses and a conservative policy agenda.

Keywords: Childhood, Liberalism, Sexualisation, Girls, Sexuality, Consent

Introduction

1.1 'Sexualisation' has become established as a recognised social problem within and beyond the Anglophone public sphere. Though there are a variety of different discourses on the issue, they have had in common the construction of 'sexualisation' as contaminating the sexual subjectivity and values of young people, encouraging self-exploitation. As I have explored in another article tracing a genealogy of the concept, feminist media discourses have played an important part in bringing problematising 'sexualisation'. From the early 1980s, these discourses have used the term to critique the way that sexist cultural representations have been undermining the confidence and social power of young girls, and putting them at sexual risk by blurring the crucial line between 'normal' women and the 'unhealthy' lifestyle of strippers or prostitutes (Schiro 1981). The frequency of articles making this argument intensified from 2003. Perhaps among the most important of the media texts of the period were LaFerla (2003), Pollet and Hurwitz (2004), Haynes (2005), Levy (2005) and Dalton (2005). For example, citing each of texts, the American Psychological Association stated in its influential Report on the Sexualization of Girls (2007: 1) that the 'Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls was formed in response to these expressions of public concern'. These media actors positioned themselves as the true heirs to the feminist tradition and its critical insights, in contrast to contemporary youth. These youth were depicted as at risk of losing feminist gains in economic, social, legal and sexual life that had been piteously hard-won by their foremothers.

1.2 Dalton (2005), for instance, expressed concern that 'sometime over the past couple of decades, while we adults weren't looking, class went out and trash came in'. '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, sexualisation 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).

1.3 Pollet and Hurwitz (2004) identified that these feminist media discourses on sexualisation 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.

1.4 The feminist 'sex wars' were an acrimonious debate about whether or not, in a society which eroticises power differentials between men and women, meaningful female sexual agency is possible (Jeffreys 1990; Duggan & Hunter 2006). In agreement with the point made by Pollet and Hurwitz, a link between these debates and contemporary discourses on sexualisation has also been drawn by contemporary sociologists of gender, though they have not offered a sustained analysis. Christoffersen and Ostrowska (2011) have noted that 'we don't hear about the "sex wars" anymore but new terms, like for instance "sexualisation" and "pornification", especially of childhood, have entered public discourse'. Ringrose (2011: 99) has noted that the debate around 'sexualisation' has 'become polarised between a condemnation of sex and calls to more heavily regulate young people's use of various media, and those who critique the ''sexualisation thesis'' as part of a moral panic that robs children of their rights, sexuality and agency'. And Gill (2012) has expressed concern that 'for all their force in animating and inspiring a new generation of feminists (Banyard 2010), I worry too that these terms threaten to reinstate the terms of the 'sex wars' of the 1980s, with their familiar polarizations'.

1.5 Prompted by discussion of ideas relating to my previous articles on the topic of sexualisation at the recent Modern Girlhoods conference at Brunel University, I intend here to further elaborate my account. My analysis here is certainly not intended as exhaustive, as concepts of 'sexualisation', 'childhood' and 'responsibility' are polyvalent and contested terms which each operate in various ways across different cultural contexts. Nonetheless, further light can be shed upon the problematisation of 'sexualisation' by setting out to interrogate in what way and why feminist discourses on 'sexualisation' can be regarded as re-playing themes from the 1980s 'sex wars'. First I shall address the way that appeal to the figure of the 'girl' within feminist discourses problematising 'sexualisation' has activated a powerful loophole within liberal societies: though generally it is presumed that each citizen should make choices for themselves and be responsible for those choices, where a subject is regarded as a minor they can legitimately be excused from such responsibility. This move facilitates identification of the harms associated with dominant forms of female subjectivation, as the 'girl' can serve as a metaphor for the 'becoming' of women in and through sexist cultural forms. Images of innocence also help to resist accusations that young women are responsible for sexual threats through their choice of what to wear and where to go. I will then go on to analyse this construction of young women as children as it has appeared in recent British media and policy feminist discourses. It will be identified that a side-effect of addressing 'girls' as the object of discourses on sexualisation has been to render any expression of sexuality or desire morally problematic, a corruption of childhood. Debating 'sexualisation' over the bodies of 'girls' will be argued to have led to a re-run of the feminist sex wars, as the shared fundamental stake in those debates and in contemporary discourses on sexualisation has been the question of whether sexual consent can be meaningful in the context of sexist gender norms. Furthermore, it will also be shown to have facilitated a co-option of discourses on sexualisation by ring-wing policy and media discourses, with the figure of the innocent girl threatened by sexual irresponsibility serving as a constitutive outside to neo-liberal discourses in British public discourses. Such discourses on threats to the innocent girl have anchored demands for national 'responsibility', figured as a partial retraction and partial restructuring of the welfare state. I shall conclude that debating whether or not young people are capable or incapable of meaningful consent reifies their circumstances and practices. A better conceptualisation would be more closely to the multiple, competing demands on young people, and the differential access to material and cultural resources which shape the approaches they use for responding to these imperatives.

The liberal loophole

2.1 The problematisation of 'sexualisation' circumvented a powerful set of liberal discourses operating as the terms of Anglophone social and political debate, and also representing a significant strand within feminist thought in the period in which discourses on sexualisation emerged (see e.g. Baumgardner & Richards 2000). Liberal discourses portray each citizen, abstracted from their conditions of possibility, as capable of political, commercial and sexual consent – except when victimisation undermines the conditions of such consent. As Haag (1999) and Brown (2000) have shown, freedoms and protections for women can successfully be claimed within this paradigm; however, this same discourse also limits feminist arguments, since systemic forms of oppression are reduced to the question of whether a citizen has or has not given meaningful consent. Encapsulating the operation of this dynamic in the infamous Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas case, Mahoney (1992: 1306) described how 'either you are on the playing field of liberal competition, in which case you require no protection, or you prove into a category as a victim who is being kept off the field'.

2.2 The 'that's her choice' paradigm must, without question, be recognised as the foundation for significant liberal feminist victories across the political, economic and cultural domains. However, it has also marked out a limit to what feminist claims would be taken as intelligible and legitimate in the public sphere by framing the operation of gendered power and inequalities as primarily a matter of consent. Yet feminist discourses on sexualisation in the period 2003–5 operated in a way that circumvented this limit. There is a longstanding loophole in the liberal perspective which situates individuals as naturally capable of full consent, except where they have been subject to victimisation. This loophole can be seen, for example, in Mill's *On Liberty* ([1859] 2008: 89): 'if protection against themselves is confessedly due to children and persons under age, is society equally not bound to afford it to persons of mature years who are equally incapable of self-government?'. It can be seen again in Milton Friedman's ([1962] 2002: 33)

Capitalism and Freedom, in his influential justification for policies which promote the freedom of the market: 'Freedom is a tenable objective only for responsible individuals. We do not believe in freedom for madmen or children... We are willing neither to permit them freedom not to shoot them.'

2.3 Thus 'yes means yes' does not stand as an effective way of deliberating the meaning or value of a practice when the individual in question is a *minor*: a discursive figure whose individual volition is uncoupled from socially and legally recognised consent, such that they do 'not have a consent to give or to withdraw' (Archard 1998: 119). Liberal discourses are willing to allow that meaningful political, commercial or sexual consent might well not be present for such a subject, though drawing the line between responsibility and minority may necessitate considerable sleight-of-hand. As Lyons (2010: 277–278) described in his comparative study of contemporary legal discourses in the UK, in order to ensure that a category of subjects called 'children' can embody the category of minority, legal discourses find themselves in contradiction: 'Children of the age of 10 have their capacity stretched on the legislative rack in order to make them ''responsible'', while in other contexts adolescents have theirs amputated by the courts in order to shrink their decisional competence'. Such work permits the construction of minority as an ostensibly natural category and a condition through which every subject passes though at some early point in their lives – and to which they may be returned under certain conditions. Activating this liberal loophole, arguments that 'a mass-marketed ideal of female sexiness derived from stripper culture is being sold to an ever younger set', and that 'these girls seem whole but they aren't. There is often a lost little girl inside' legitimately and emotively circumvent liberal discourses, which contend that each citizen should be free to decide such matters for themselves.

2.4 In order to call attention to the intensification and commercial spread of misogynistic cultural forms in contemporary society, feminist discourses on sexualisation in the period 2003–5 addressed themselves to a new discursive figure. Rather than addressing adults, where liberal arguments about choice could dampen claims about suffering, these discourses addressed 'daughters... volunteering to be sex objects'. In such discourses, the commercial and sexual choices made by young women are able to be situated not as the result of true consent, but as caused by a prior corruption: 'sexualisation'. As I have shown in another article, this move must be understood in the context of the figure of the 'daughter' or 'girl' in feminist discourses, who had been mobilised in the years just prior as a crucial symbolic boundary separating different modes of feminist theorising. At the close of the 'sex wars' in the early 1990s, a debate occurred 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 'daughters' and '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 in the early 2000s, 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). As Egan and Hawkes (2013) have discerned, the 'girl' has been mobilised to 'represent the dashed hope of middle class white liberal feminism (girls embracing phallic femininity instead of feminist visions of gender and achievement) as well as a figure that helps resuscitate and grant public validity to a certain type of feminist politics in an increasingly hostile or anti feminist context'. Specifically, in addressing 'girls', feminist theory could address itself through a displaced 'substitute' figure (Brown 2001: 54) to enculturation, to the subjectivation of women.

2.5 This focus on the 'girl' as a metaphor for female subjectivation was retained by feminist discourses on 'sexualisation'; 'sexualisation' is a portmanteau of the words 'sexual socialisation'. As a portmanteau, 'sexualisation' brings into a mismatched 'disjunctive synthesis' (Deleuze [1969] 1990: 55) 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. A discussion of sexism in society at large, which would otherwise have been dampened by liberal retorts about personal choice, could therefore intelligibly and legitimately be enacted through sexualisation as a developmental discourse about harm, addressing itself to 'daughters' or 'girls'. Rather that seeming to speak from the position of the feminist concerned about sexism, 'sexualisation' placed the speaker on the easier, more consensual, more emotive terrain of protecting children from harm.

2.6 It would therefore be with reference to teenagers under the age of consent that feminist claims could henceforth be intelligibly and legitimately made about gendered forms of power. This is quite explicit, for example, in an early article by Roberts (2003), with the title 'While liberals remain nervous about discussing rules and standards, they fail today's children'. She argues that the vulnerability of children trumps liberal demands for choice, claiming that '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?' A similar move is made by an article by Linda Papadopoulos, author of the 2010 UK Home Office *Review on the Sexualisation of Young People* (2010a). Papadopoulos expressed concern about the danger of 'sexualised' cultural forms such as the music of Rihanna, which should not be permitted on national radio. She specifies, however, that 'had it not been for my daughter's presence in the car, I probably wouldn't have batted an eyelid. After all, it was a mainstream station and she's a mainstream singer' (Papadopoulos 2010b).

2.7 This invocation of the status of 'girls' as minors in legitimising feminist discourses on harm can also be seen in the Papadopoulos Review (2010). The Papadopoulos Review contends that young people have been displaced from the natural form of 'who they are' by the intrusion of sexualisation (2010a: 4). As a result of sexualisation, girls can be led to 'highlight sexual characteristics that they do not yet possess' (2010a: 39), as for example in the case of 'a pre-teen who wears a push-up bra to get the attention of boys' (2010a: 53). This developmental narrative, grounded in the changing upper and lower body of the 'girl', supports and is interleaved with an account of horrific dangers in wider society: 'When girls are dressed in miniature versions of adult clothes, there is the danger that people will project adult motives,

responsibility and agency on girls, and that this in turn may have the impact of normalising the sexual abuse of children' (2010a: 39). In such a way, young women can be situated by feminist policy and media discourses on sexualisation as within but threatening the purity of childhood, as both prior to consent and requiring regulation in their commercial and sexual choice-making, and as capable of only ineffective political action (see e.g. Jones 2011 on the SlutWalks).

2.8 When they have been constructed as innocent 'girls', the bodies of young women risks operating as a tricky site to debate sexism in contemporary society. It 'means one is either a child or a non-person', in Hinshelwood's (2001: 154) terms. Such a strategy runs rather too close to 'blaming the victim'. If we do countenance that the clothing choices of younger teenagers 'may have the impact of normalising the sexual abuse of children' by adult men (Papadopoulos 2010a: 39), this should be reason to problematise not teenage commercial decisions and attire but certain possibilities of normative masculinity. Situating young women as innocent girls, playing on their lack of capacity to consent, does discursively protect them from the threat of being 'sluts', asking to be raped. Such a strategy, however, risks – though does not necessitate – reaffirming the misogynist division between innocent and wanton, pure and impure, protected and abandoned forms of femininity.

2.9 As Ringrose (2013: 49) has suggested, 'the sexualisation discourse is drawn around class-based moralising lines and tends to invoke fears over contaminating forms of sexuality infringing upon constructions of appropriate girlhood sexual innocence and purity'. The division between pure and impure femininities is a division coded and organised along classed and raced lines, and policed by the threat of rape. As we saw earlier, Dalton (2005) problematises misogynistic culture through the narrative that 'sometime over the past couple of decades, while we adults weren't looking, class went out and trash came in'. Egan and Hawkes (2008: 306) have proposed that in, for example, addressing 'girls' as 'kinderwhores' or 'prostitots' (e.g. Levin & Kilbourne 2008; Opplinger 2008), discourses on sexualisation play upon narratives of the 'infiltration of working class feminine sexuality' into the 'uncontaminated domain' of white, middle-class childhood. In this way, 'poverty, familial conditions, curiosity, desire, abuse, addiction, economics and a whole host of other complex factors seem to give way to the media and commodities as the primary causal factor' operating gender exploitation in general, and sex work in particular. Egan (2013) further contends that 'examining the covers of books, analyzing the stars discussed in narratives of peril, and reviewing the examples of both good girls and bad, illustrates that sexualization is a racially specific threat to white, middle class, heterosexual girls'. On such a terrain, Igenoza (2010) and the Black Women's Blueprint (2011) have argued that black girls are seen as always already sexual, incapable of sexualisation because the black female body is inherently violable.

The responsible right-wing

3.1 Looking back, Papadopoulos (2011) has remarked that 'since my review came out, the wrong things have been focused on', which run 'against the feminist' goals of her Home Office Review. The same point has been made by Tolman (2012), one of the co-authors of the *American Psychological Association Report*, who notes that 'our complex sense of desire as informed by an array of social forces has been hollowed by a neoliberal psychological interpretation that reduces desire only to the property of an individual girl our complex'. Both Papadopoulos and Tolman, however, have continued to mobilise the concept of 'sexualisation' as a feminist analytical tool. This reduction and focus on the wrong things has not been a simple co-option, but rather can be understood as positively facilitated by certain currents within feminist discourses on sexualisation. When some feminists addressed sexism through a discourse that situates young women as minors, they spoke of a population incapable of socially recognised sexual choice. In this way they have helped facilitate a conservative redeployment that has been less concerned with combating sexism than in regulating the choices of young women and the content of the public sphere. They buttress a narrative in which the sexuality and desires of young women are rendered pathological and morally unacceptable as judged by a conservative standard of public decency and innocent subjectivity. The use of 'sexualisation' as a developmental narrative focused on 'girls' to highlight misogyny in wider society has succeeded in centring moralising attention on young women and sex, rather than critical attention on sexism and heteronormativity.

3.2 Butler (1997: 95) has shown in the case of the 1980s 'sex wars' that 'the insistence that consent precedes sexuality in all instances' by feminist public intellectuals is very useful to a 'liberal individualism in which consent is constitutive of personhood'. The same applies today. The feminist problematisation of sexualisation has been exceptionally useful to a form of discourse that I have termed elsewhere the 'responsible right-wing': a neo-liberal political discourse in Britain on sexualisation in which citizens are impelled to assume their ostensibly natural form as responsible consumers and entrepreneurs. Whereas classical liberalism suggests that freedom and market processes need to be extracted from the excesses of political governance, neo-liberal discourses re-position the state as needing to re-structure both itself and market forces in order to return citizens to their natural state as autonomous, responsible consumers and entrepreneurs. In 'responsible right-wing' discourses on sexualisation, which have unintentionally been facilitated by feminist media and policy discourses on the topic, citizens are enjoined to become self-contained consumers and entrepreneurs, in contrast to innocent, threatened girls. The result is an intensified affirmation of the liberal abstraction of individuals from their material conditions and the contradictory demands on them; this is sad and ironic, since the problematisation of sexualisation was initially a work-around for identifying harms missed by such liberal abstractions.

3.3 To take the British case: 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 legitimation strategy for financial measures to incentivise heterosexual marriage; 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 and 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).

The child's deficient level of 'responsibility' compared to the adult permits the adult to be discursively constructed as naturally 'responsible' in the prescribed economic and moral manner.

3.4 Considering Cameron's statements on sexualisation together with the Papadopoulos Review, Moore (2010) commented that 'feminists have been arguing this case for many years. But to hear it come out of the mouths of David Cameron and the Home Office is quite strange.' Even with Labour still in government in early 2010, Conservative politicians and right-wing media commentators had gained discursive ownership of the issue of sexualisation, despite the fact that it had initially arisen in Britain, just like the US, primarily as a left-wing and feminist concern. Labour politicians tried in vain to recoup ownership of the issue. For example, Labour's Ed Balls said: 'The commercialisation and sexualisation of children is an issue I raised in the Children's Plan two years ago when I became Children's Secretary and it's good to have David Cameron's support' (Balls in Barrett 2010). In a debate on the floor of the House of Commons on 18th March 2010, Conservative MP Theresa May asked what the Government's response would be to the Papadopoulos Review and its significant findings. Labour's Maria Eagle responded with incredulity to the support the Conservative Party were showing to a review commissioned by Labour, though she wryly noted that 'a late convert to effective action is better than no convert at all' (HC Deb 18 March 2010 c970).

3.5 However, as the need for such statements by Balls and Eagle indicates, the Conservative concern for sexualisation was not simply a 'conversion', but a capture and re-deployment of the policy issue. The focused of concerns regarding the sexualisation of girls were shifted from its contribution to violence against women to its contribution to the role of 'irresponsible' behaviour in the breakdown of public morality. Cameron has queried: '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). Such language can be seen again, for instance, in the Big Society Bank policy initiative. Radically scaling back direct state funding of charities, the British government has worked to create a system in which charities bid for contracts from the 'Big Society Bank' to run their services. The result is movement towards market-style pressures. Advancing this policy agenda, in February 2011, the British government launched 'a transition fund to help charities prepare to bid for these contracts and a big society bank to provide some working capital when they're awarded them. The big society is about changing the way our country is run. No more of a government treating everyone like children who are incapable of taking their own decisions. Instead, let's treat adults like adults and give them more responsibility' (Cameron 2011a).

3.6 *Letting Children Be Children* was issued by Reg Bailey (2011a) in June 2011 on behalf of the UK's Department for Education. The ***Bailey Review*** makes tactical use of prior feminist discourses, whilst subsuming and denaturing their critique of sexism by transforming it into a defence of a morally-conservative notion of decency in combination with a free-market ethos. In two articles with Meg Barker, I have analysed the text of the ***Bailey Review*** itself. Suffice to note here that the ***Bailey Review*** lists four objects of parental concerns which together comprise 'sexualisation'. 'Sexualisation' is present when content and practices are:

> S1) 'sexually suggestive' in the public domain;
> S2) treat women as 'sexual only';
> S3) encourage 'children to think of themselves (or others to think of children) as adult or sexual';
> S4) are 'glamorising or normalising "deviant" behaviour' (2011b: 4).

This conflation supports a wider tendency across the ***Bailey Review***: whilst a concern for misogyny is included within the problematisation of sexualisation, in line with prior feminist media discourses, it is enveloped and largely denatured by the dominating concern with propriety. Through the fourfold construction of 'sexualisation', gendered relations of power can not only be hidden from view, but covertly deployed by the text. The issue becomes how – with young women (S2) equated with minors (S3) – young women's signs of sexuality or desire outside the home (S1) are measures of pathology as judged by a conservative standard of decency (S4). The gender of the 'sexualised child' is generally not addressed by the ***Bailey Review***, despite discussing 'girls' in nearly every example and quotation pertaining to sexuality. Sometimes 'gender stereotyped' content is taken as an aspect of sexualisation. On other occasions, however, they are discursively separated: for example, of 873 parents surveyed '73 felt that there were inappropriate slogans on children's clothing – either of a sexualised nature or slogans that were gender-stereotyped' (Bailey 2011c: 7; see also 2011a: 26).

3.7 The media response in Britain to the ***Bailey Review*** has not been as intense as the flurry of articles in the weeks that followed the publication of the ***Papadopoulos Review***. In part this may be because, in the context of June 2011, economic affairs and protests in the Middle East were more newsworthy. Yet also significant is the fact that the ***Bailey Review*** did not fundamentally breach the dominant media narrative on sexualisation in Britain, which had been cemented by the ***Papadopoulos Review***. It rather redeployed this narrative. Whilst the ***Papadopoulos Review*** was not oriented by the right-wing, neo-liberal agenda of the ***Bailey Review***, the undifferentiated attack in the ***Papadopoulos Review*** on sexism and sexuality compared to an ideal of girlhood as innocence and minority, meant that the problematisation of sexualisation that it presented was well adapted for re-mobilisation within the agenda of neo-liberal media

discourses and the policy discourse of the later *Bailey Review*.

3.8 One media outlet that did focus a great deal of attention on the *Bailey Review* over subsequent weeks was the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail*. Both the *Bailey Review* itself and David Cameron's (2011b) response were leaked in advance to the newspaper two days before their official release, so that their findings were 'first revealed in Saturday's Daily Mail' (Shipman 2011a) on the 6 June, 2011. Shipman (2011b) stated that 'in his report on the pressures faced by young children, Reg Bailey comes down firmly on the side of the Mail' against those who do not see public displays of female sexuality as an offence against decency. Shipman (2011a) further noted that 'the Prime Minister endorsed the findings... throwing his weight behind the Mail's campaign to stem the tide of sexualised content confronting families'. In a later editorial (*The Daily Mail* 2011), the measures suggested by the *Bailey Review* were described as having likewise 'slammed' the 'sexualisation' of girls represented by the 'lewd' behaviour of the singer Taylor Momsen, who 'straddles a female fan as she puts on a raunchy show in Barcelona'. *The Daily Mail* can be seen here making use of the conflation within the *Bailey Review* of 'sexualisation' as a threat to innocent children, a mainstreaming of 'deviant' sexualities, and the new visibility of 'sexually suggestive' content in the public domain.

3.9 Also writing in *The Daily Mail*, Parsons (2011) described as 'ironic' that the same week the report was released to fight the process of sexualisation, the feminist 'Slut Walk' took place in London. This worldwide march by young women was incited by the remark of a Toronto policeman that 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised', and expressed the sentiment that no set of clothes or practices is an invitation to be raped. Parsons, however, contends that 'it is not empowering to dress like a slut'. The 'Slut Walk' is, within this account, a 'cruel' instantiation of the sexualisation of the innocence of girls that the *Bailey Review* is working to combat: 'Showing a little restraint isn't old-fashioned or repressed. And it certainly won't put off the kind of men most women want to attract.' With sexualisation problematised in a way that subsumes and denatures a concern for misogyny, even feminist anti-rape activism can be described as sexualisation since it poses a threat to the innocence of girls. Such post-feminist accusations of feminism as a cause of the sexualisation of girls have been repeated by subsequent articles: Gyngell (2012), for instance, has argued that 'Girls give and boys can demand it. This is the nadir into which feminism and early sexualisation... has perversely brought us. It is the price of gender parity,' for 'women's power once lay in their restraint. Now young women believe it lies in excess. Of course it does not. It is a new and willing form of prostitution. It is as disastrous for girls' self esteem as it is for men's respect of them. It is ironic that feminism instead of ending female exploitation has opened up new dimensions.'

3.10 Academic and journalists writing from a self-declared feminist perspective has also been another key site at which discourses in response to the *Bailey Review* have flourished. In the final paper of the ESRC-funded seminar series, 'Pornification? Complicating debates about the "sexualisation of culture"' (2009–2011), Coy and Garner (2011) responded to the *Bailey Review* with the proposal that rising public and political concern regarding sexualisation represents a real opportunity for feminist activists and researchers. They argued that feminists should make strategic use of the issue of sexualisation, which could provide a platform for combating the entrenched sexism of contemporary society that facilitates violence against women. A whole 'shopping-list' of feminist objectives could be achieved through use of the language of 'sexualisation' rather than its critique. The fight for a more gender-aware sex education in schools, for example, could be buttressed by public awareness of the difficulties girls face in achieving a strong identity in contemporary society. The strength of Coy and Garner's position lies in the fact that it is an open question as to which of the four aspects (S1–S4) of sexualisation within the problematisation of the *Bailey Review* can be jettisoned or reworked without losing the interest of the public eye (The Welsh Government's new 'Childhood, Sexuality, Sexualisation and Equalities' cross-party group will provide a fascinating test-case in this regard).

3.11 Yet there have also been feminist responses to the *Bailey Review* that express concern that such a feminist strategy may have also inadvertently lent support an agenda which is not concerned to combat but to reinforce and reinvent gendered forms of oppression. A response to the *Bailey Review* by Dustin (Dustin & Fae 2011) in *The Guardian* is illustrative of the ambivalence felt by discursive actors identifying as feminist towards the issue of sexualisation in contemporary Britain. Dustin claimed that 'the risk is that this plays to a moralistic agenda that is less about women and girl's equality, and more to do with the repression of young people's sexuality and rights', whilst at the same time noting that 'the Bailey review highlights a real problem. Our sexualised culture reinforces stereotypes of women and girls as sexual objects'. Another article by Ashley (2011) presented the view that 'feminists can make cause with traditionalists in wanting to limit some of the more extreme effects of an exploitative culture'. She claimed that 'there are good things in the Bailey report, including ideas on internet filters and the TV watershed; and Labour shouldn't get itself into the position of opposing the good in the cause of the perfect. But the big thing missing from a debate dominated by the centre-right is the F-word. Without a feminist perspective you have no hope of an honest discussion about the sexualisation of young girls.'

3.12 By contrast, Moore (2011) criticised the *Bailey Review* in a later article in *The Guardian*. She noted that though 'sexualisation' was brought to the public eye as a feminist concern through an emotive language of purity and impurity, the issue has been successfully co-opted by a right-wing political agenda:

> Our children are growing up too soon. They are encouraged to venture into territory that they are too emotionally immature to inhabit. These are the charges, repeated again and again, which presuppose an age of purity. I have made them myself at times. How this imagery affects us all needs to be studied. Properly. The latest report is an example of how not to do it… The omnipresent sexual imagery long questioned by feminists precisely because it devalued women is now being questioned by the right, who in every other respect are pushing things back for women.

Moore suggested that this co-option has been facilitated by a lack of conceptual precision among feminist discourses, including her own (see e.g. Moore 1995). Above all, she argued, 'the awkward encounter between the right and feminism is premised on this daft word, sexualisation'. She suggested that it 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 about 'sexualisation', Moore contended, has not been so much to raise awareness of sexism in contemporary British society but to focus moral and medical attention on young women; this has been to the great advantage of right-wing discourses such as those of the ***Bailey Review***, 'in the attempt to control female sexuality'. Emphasising her earlier points about discourses on sexualisation, Moore (2012) has asked 'Where does this supposed Tory/feminism crossover falter? Right here on the debate over reproductive rights, sexuality and the way women are portrayed in the media.'

Conclusion

4.1 I have argued here that the feminist 'sex-wars' have been reignited by discourses on sexualisation. The reason for this is that discourses on sexualisation have re-problematised whether or not female sexual and commercial practices can be meaningful in a misogynistic culture – resituating this classic debate now in terms of 'girls' rather than adult women. The result is a battle between different feminist positions on the moral value of sexuality and desire, for the fundamental division between liberal feminists on the one hand and radical or social feminists on the other has been that the former believe that consent (political, commercial, sexual) can be meaningful even where the oppression of women is in evidence. The polarised radical/socialist feminist position produced by this frame can suggest that those who valorise sexual freedom for young people are in league with pornographers and sex traffickers. The polarised liberal feminist position can suggest that it is both incorrect and unethical to question whether young people are autonomous and responsible in the sense demanded by dominant commercial and sexual discourses. Even academic debates have bifurcated in this way: 'contemporary debates tend to fix girls as either objectified, innocent passive victims or agentic, knowledgeable, savvy navigators of a contemporary ''toxic'' sexual culture, obscuring the messy realities of lived sexual subjectivities and how girls may be positioned in these ways simultaneously' (Renold & Ringrose 2011: 3, parentheses suppressed).

4.2 Yet it is my contention that we do a disservice to young people when we abstract them from their lives too quickly by problematising them primarily as either capable or incapable of consent. 'Choice' can be a useful notion sometimes, but its utility is questionable for adequately addressing the new forms of sexual and commercial subjectivity suggested and imposed in contemporary society. Gill (2008: 45) has argued that 'a notion of women as completely free agents who just 'please themselves' does not serve feminist or cultural understandings well. It cannot account for why the look that young women seek to achieve is so similar: if it were the outcome of everyone's individual, idiosyncratic preferences, surely there would be greater diversity, rather than growing homogeneity organized around a slim yet curvaceous, toned, hairless, young body. Moreover, the emphasis upon choice simply sidesteps and avoids all the important but difficult questions about how socially constructed ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own. These questions have long been at the heart of women's liberation movements'. Adding to Gill, what I would argue gets particularly missed out by contemporary, polarised debates on sexualisation are two fundamental issues: (1) the ***differential access to material and cultural resources*** of young women; and (2) the ***competing cultural imperatives*** (e.g. be sexy, but not a slut) they face such that each is haunted by the spectre of failed femininity. Rather than activating the liberal loophole, it would be more analytically incisive (and, maybe, also better feminist politics) to reject the reified concept of autonomous agency that divides subjects into the responsible, the irresponsible and the innocent.

4.3 I will close with two examples of work that exemplify the kind of approach that I am recommending, as an alternative to debates about the presence or absence of reified notions of choice (though see also Jackson & Tinkler 2007; Renold 2008; Vares et al. 2011). First, in ***Growing Up Girl*** (2001), Walkerdine et al. offer a powerful intersectional analysis of gender and class. The authors argue against neoliberal discourses that position citizens as by nature autonomous and responsible entrepreneurs and consumers. They suggest that this little reflects the reality of working class life, and obfuscates the way that opportunities for young women to achieve this valorised subject-position are especially scarce and emotionally costly. For example, the authors describe one of their research subjects, Sharon, who had achieved a remarkable degree of academic success given her socioeconomic background and school context. Her parents had made financial sacrifices throughout her childhood in order that she could have books and cultural experiences, to facilitate her learning. Sharon appears, in one light, as an effective entrepreneur of the human capital invested in her by her parents (see Leibowitz 1974). Yet the researchers also note that Sharon is having unprotected sex with her boyfriend. Sharon states that 'it's the chance that you take, in't it?' (Walkerdine et al. 2001: 207). Such sexual behaviour could be seen, at the opposite pole to her academic achievement, as manifesting an irresponsible use of her sexual freedoms. Walkerdine et al. (2001), however, suggest Sharon's behaviour is not simply 'responsible' nor 'irresponsible', but an attempt to respond to competing imperatives. Walkerdine et al. describe the anxiety, felt both by Sharon and her parents, regarding the cultural and geographical separations entailed by entrance to the middle-class. The researchers suggest that teenage pregnancy would allow Sharon to remain within cultural and geographical proximity with her family. However, it would do so without directly enacting academic 'failure', which was forbidden by the sacrifices her parents had made for her education.

4.4 A second example of a research project which advances between the polarities of the presence or absence of choice is Ringrose's (2013) ***Postfeminist Education?***. Ringrose draws upon a Deleuzian approach, sensitive to the disjunctures within and between age and gender norms. Arguing against liberal accounts of 'choice' as the free selection among good and pathological alternatives in the domains of conflict, work and desire, Ringrose shows how the discourses of feminine 'excess' are animated by a contradiction between cultural imperatives. Young women are assessed at once against the image of

childhood innocence built into normative assumptions about young femininity and against the neoliberal image of the assertive and self-reliant entrepreneur of one's own human and erotic capital. 'Crises' over feminine excess are diagnosed by Ringrose as both an effect of this painful contradiction, and a means through which the contradiction is occluded by the blame placed upon young women themselves for their inappropriate choices. Since these tensions are more easily managed by those with the economic and cultural resources to stave off failure as judged by either standard, Ringrose also notes how blame is disproportionally allocated to the least well off and most marginalised. For example, two of her working-class research subjects, Daniela and Nicole, respond to sexual bullying at school by 'positioning themselves as each other's slut and whore'. Doing so, Ringrose (2013: 124) observes, 'changes the terminology from one of masculine control and operates' as a source of pleasure and solidarity where these would otherwise be scarce and costly. However Ringrose cautions against either seeing this act as expressing a full presence or absence of choice. Rather, it suggests that compulsion and oppression operate through the sexual agency enjoined for Daniela and Nicole, and that their agency operates through assembling practices out of the limited, misogynistic cultural resources available to them. Ringrose's analysis, like my own, suggests that we will continue to re-play the sex wars so long as we do not recognise the contradictory imperatives, operating differentially depending upon an actor's cultural and material resources, that young women should be assertive but not aggressive, successful but not square, sexy but not a slut.

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