

Angela McRobbie:
*Feminism and the Politics of Resilience:
Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare.*
Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity, 2020.

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The transformations of society over the last decades have undoubtedly shaped feminism – not only its nature, but especially the way it evolves. In this book, Angela McRobbie takes a thorough look at the issues that have been discussed around the possible achievement of gender equality. McRobbie has built an extensive career upon critical thought, contributing immensely to media and cultural studies. As a feminist media scholar, she has questioned, in particular, neoliberal policies. However, the author recognizes throughout the book that her point of view is centered, above all, on the peculiarities of the British conjuncture.

Although the book resembles Rottenberg's (2018) or Brown's (2015) ideas of feminism and its relationship with neoliberalism, McRobbie exposes new perspectives in feminist media studies which largely contribute to a better understanding of gender issues and their nature.

In an introductory phase, the author assumes the position that served as a guide for the writing of the whole book: A critical perspective towards the elements which, in her vision, contribute to an "increasingly fragmented and splintered society" (p. 1). As in some of the author's previous works, she immediately identifies neoliberalism as one of the main causes of a gender issue entrenched in contemporary society, specifically through media objects. Pressuring women to be slim, good-looking, and professionally successful, this political position seems to comprehend stereotyped norms of femininity allied to an alleged female empowerment. McRobbie believes that this whole set of ideas are

orchestrated for the perpetuation of a meritocratic logic that works to favour those who fit in with the neoliberal terms and decide, whether voluntarily or not, to collaborate with them. However, besides neoliberalism, the author announces the presentation of two new elements that appear to be part of the referred inequality phenomenon: The first being a new feminist campaign “associated with a left-wing social agenda” (p. 2), and the second being “the coming to visibility of women’s poverty” (p. 2), which bears the apparent impossibility of some women’s social mobility, namely the ones who are born in working-class families or are part of an ethnic minority.

In chapter 1, McRobbie discloses the impact that the transformation of liberal feminism into neoliberal feminism had on families’ dynamics. Since women started to be presented as valid employees who should commit to their work as much as to their family, they became pressured to behave as “exemplary mothers’ within a political culture intent on [...] encouraging better and more effective parenthood” (p. 21). Nevertheless, this social incitement for women to combine work with motherhood – and try to master both jobs as best they can – seems to hide a perverse purpose to negatively expose the individuals who fail to meet these behavioural standards. In fact, while trying to ensure both familiar and professional success, some women might not be able to ensure a perfect balance between these two aspects. Simultaneously, “relying on support or subsidy is somehow [seen as] shameful” (p. 27). This means that if their family or their job is not of an ideal status for the social community, the latter is encouraged to disrespect the supposed accountable people: women. Thus, McRobbie explains how neoliberal contemporary family values, which seem to persist in today’s society, seem to put the responsibility of guaranteeing women’s success in the various aspects of their lives on their own shoulders, while blaming those who cannot correspond to the instituted principles. For the author, this logic supports a “neoliberal leadership-feminism predicated on preserving class and racial privilege through the prism of a normative femininity” (p. 41).

In chapter 2, McRobbie identifies the opposite situation: a setback from neoliberal feminism towards liberal feminism. The author recognizes two elements that contributed to an interruption of the generalized neoliberal thought. Firstly, consumer culture was invaded by the idea of “female success, in work, in family life, in self and in body” (p. 48). Magazines and TV shows began to portray the ideal woman as someone who sees female competition as a natural and necessary compulsion and works hard within it to become a role model for her peers. Even free magazines provided by supermarkets like Tesco or Waitrose endorse healthy eating through the depiction of “happy mothers” who give their best for their children’s growth, fostering a “competitive femininity” (p. 48) in the domestic sphere. Once again, “poor or disadvantaged women are simply stunned, and pushed out of the picture” (p. 50), as usually they cannot meet such social requirements. The realization of this conduct led to the rise of an anti-capitalist feminism that called into question the role of women in popular culture and how female empowerment was being represented, and by whom. Having in mind this paradigm shift, McRobbie relates

it to an original concept, which she named the “perfect-imperfect-resilience” or *p-i-r*. Submerged in a capitalist economy that articulates consumption with popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), Western women were denounced to be trapped in a heteronormative environment that ultimately becomes “the means by which young female subjects recognize themselves” (p. 53), having an impact on following generations.

McRobbie goes on to denouncing, in chapter 3, the way that *p-i-r* is only directed towards privileged women. “Low-qualified, unskilled disadvantaged women, including single mothers, [or] black and ethnic minority women who are materially disadvantaged [...]” (p. 74) are a sector of the population who cannot identify with feminist activism, simply because most of them do not even have a stable job. Simultaneously, and unfairly for these women, work is currently seen as a means to the approach of an empowered status. In the meantime, many of them are unable to sustain basic living conditions for themselves and their family. According to the author, “work and career become goals *instead of struggles*” and “employment for women becomes a defining mark of status and identity” (p. 76). In this way, working-class women are compelled to work as hard as they can, often subjecting themselves to low-paid or temporary jobs, holding on to the illusion of an almost impossible social upliftment, because modern work society is depicted as ineluctable. At the same time, many women living in these conditions are part of a “moral landscaping” (p. 98) that poverty-shames them – and due to belonging in classes which have no voice in society, these people become powerless and incapable of defending themselves. Besides this, “they are also too busy doing shift work, while also worrying about their teenage children [...] growing up in urban environments and for whom there are fewer if any [...] social services” (p. 98). McRobbie criticizes how the contemporary world imposes on women the performance of a flawless balance between motherhood and employment, while not giving all of them the conditions to succeed in such terms.

In the fourth and last chapter of the book, McRobbie deepens the poverty-shaming notion, presented in the previous chapter, and connects it to the emergence of reality TV. In the author’s view, certain media genres, covered by an entertainment shield, have “consistently portrayed poor people, and especially women, in derogatory ways, as a drain on the nation’s resources and as undeserving of compassion and as unworthy of protection” (p. 99). McRobbie explores the biased representation of specific female contestants on famous reality shows and how they are portrayed to resemble a working-class memory and embody a vulnerable condition, forbidding them to detach themselves from such an image. The author comes to the conclusion that the most vulnerable members of the population often serve as resources for the persistence of their social positions, being used by popular culture, and specifically by the media, to maintain a “society of inequality” (p. 123).

To conclude this review, and on a personal note, I believe this book has extreme relevance – not only to feminist media studies, but also to scholars from media, cultural, and social studies, or any individual interested in contemporary politics or gender

issues. McRobbie explores acknowledged topics, which prevail in the living moment, but through a present-day angle that holds an innovative component. McRobbie's analysis of the objects that perpetuate unequal conditions for men and women constitutes a huge contribution to media studies. Accordingly, I highlight the challenging potential of this work.

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