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Post-truth and the 'metropolitan elite' feminist: lessons from Brexit

Ruth Cain*

For British feminist legal studies, as indeed for all socio-economic scholarship in the UK, these are discomfiting and confusing times. Lack of information on the sheer complexity of the legal and political form and consequences of the vote to leave the European Union has left the nation adrift on meaningless aphorisms, such as Prime Minister Theresa May's 'Brexit means Brexit' – whether Brexit actually means a true 'go-it-alone' for Britain remains mysterious. The celebratory mood of the 'winning' side seems surreally detached from a less glorious reality, in which the true impact of prolonged economic and administrative uncertainty is yet to reveal itself. Disillusionment with UK party politics and the dire stranglehold of the neoliberal consensus (Hall, Massey and Rustin 2015), deepened and hardened by austerity, appears to have driven some of the Leave vote (Harris 2016). These voters have replied to neoliberalism's brutal refrain that 'there is no alternative' by voting for one, in the teeth of the government, the opposition, most of the business community, and the 'experts' of whom, as Michael Gove so memorably stated, everyone is tired. The collapse of the Labour party into internecine strife leaves these voters with a very real democratic deficit, an effective one-party state in Britain, which looks to have swung somewhat to the right of the previous one. The supposedly lost 'grand narrative' of nationalism and imperialism is resurgent in the USA as well as the UK: thus, we see claims from Donald Trump and the UK right-wing media that both America and Britain are going to be made 'great again' – in defiance of the fact that nation-states 'are steadily being replaced by a transnational plutocracy' (Polsky 2015, 230). The half-baked proposals of the Leave campaign to make Britain a centre of global free trade melancholically recall British imperial and colonial rhetoric. Exhorted to 'take back control', the electorate have only fantasies of a lost Empire to reclaim. Fantasy-imperialism thus meshes with anti-globalisation sentiment – the macho national dominance that will supposedly quell global feminisation.

The vote has brought stark inequalities and losses in post-1970s British society to the forefront of political debate, and a disrupted gender order appears to be one of these. The overwhelming Leave vote in the impoverished post-industrial Labour heartlands of the North of England and South Wales led journalist John Harris to claim in his pre-Brexit survey of the national working-class mood that male losses were at the heart of the crisis: 'men (and men are particularly relevant here) who would once have been certain in their identity as miners, or steelworkers, now feel demeaned and ignored' (Harris 2016). Feminisation of the labour force through zero-hour, call-centre work reduces the proud working man to 'demeaning', unmasculine, low-paid and insecure labour. Nonetheless, since Brexit is, according to the analysis of most economists, likely to lead to long-term economic

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contraction for the UK, it is likely that women (who suffer disproportionately from cuts to services and benefits), particularly women in the poorest rural and Northern post-industrial areas, will be among the hardest-hit groups. They suffer alongside men from the loss of secure, non-flexible work and steeply rising housing and living costs. There was in fact gender parity across the vote, with class, age and education being much stronger differentials. Voting analysis presents feminists with a dilemma that perhaps they have not had to confront so starkly before: the majority of poorer (and older) women primarily voted Leave (Statista 2016; Ashcroft 2016). These are women most British feminists would agree are deeply and unfairly disadvantaged, primary targets for political, legal and social reform. They have, however, mostly voted for what looks likely to be a future of decreased trade, fewer 'foreigners', the slashing of development funding for the areas in which many of them live, and the potential bonfire of the laws which have protected low-paid workers and women's rights in the UK for decades. There are other, perhaps more painful acknowledgements which must be made. Leave voters are overwhelmingly white (73% of black British citizens voted Remain), and overwhelmingly demonstrate contempt for feminism (with 78% believing it to be a force for ill), social liberalism (74%) and multiculturalism (81%) – but are far more evenly split on capitalism (Ashcroft 2016). Many British feminists, particularly those who live in the South East, in cities, or work in universities, are now forced to realise that they – not the public schoolboys and ex-financiers who led the Leave campaign – represent the hated 'metropolitan elite' (Williams 2016; O'Neill 2016), deemed to be smugly out of touch with what Nigel Farage, in his European Parliament victory/departure speech, called the 'ordinary, decent' people of Britain. The sense of polarisation is tangible. We 'metropolitan' feminists have no doubt suffered from the lamentable social media 'bubble' effect (Crary 2014, 53); feminist publications, blogs and facebook groups, where a racist or sexist comment or attitude will attract immediate censure, reinforce our sense that 'we' speak for oppressed women; but many underprivileged women clearly see feminists and 'leftists' as patronising and harmful. Do we thus simply condemn those women as racist and sexist themselves? Or do we attempt in some way to try to address the gulfs which have clearly arisen between 'our' feminist praxis and much of the 'grassroots' we purport to represent?

Feminist members of the disappointed 48% clearly need to deal with 'our' own sense of shock and loss and our clear epistemological distance from 'ordinary' people; and this point has validity even for those of us who did not recognise ourselves as an 'elite' until June 24. Yet when cities such as London, with levels of inequality higher than almost anywhere in the UK, and post-industrial cities such as Liverpool and Stockport have overwhelmingly voted Remain, must we simply be humbled and 'suck it up'? The middle-class 'elite' are not what they are painted: all except the richest are experiencing lowering wages, rising debt, and the threat of becoming 'waste' humans as late- neoliberal 'eschatology' expands its punitive and disciplinary apparatus (Peck 2013; Bauman 2004). Responsibilisation discourse – the citizen as 'rational autonomous economic agent' and consummate individual (Walker et al. 2014) – justifies these extensions of discipline. *All* labour, even the better-paid, better-qualified end of it, faces constriction as capital rises to unimagined heights of control (Berardi 2005). In

this context, attacking middle-class city-dwellers fails to take account of the depredations of precarity in the new flexible knowledge economies which many share with the young. The under-30s, who must endure less security, higher debt and fewer opportunities than their parents, now see their freedoms further curtailed and their 'country taken back' to an era they never lived through, amid imperial nostalgia which is meaningless to them. Women aged 18-24 were the group most strongly in favour of Remain, at 80% (Statista 2016). As Ros Gill (2008) notes, young women are the emblematic hardworking, well-trained, low-paid, flexible, neoliberal workers. The feminisation of middle-class workers affects both them and men in similar jobs, as employers demand more and more 'passion' and 'commitment' for less money, while burdening the acquisition of skills with mounting debt.

Brexit and the 'right-wing woman'

To consider the 'conservatism' of the primarily older women who voted Leave, I have returned to a radical feminist text, Andrea Dworkin's *Right Wing Women* (1978). Dworkin argued that right-wing women believe (and vote) as they do out of fear of and displaced anger at male violence, but what she says about the morphing of displaced anger into hate and fear has broader application:

The Right provides these symbols of danger by designating clearly defined groups of outsiders as sources of danger. The identities of the dangerous outsiders can change over time to meet changing social circumstances—for example, racism can be encouraged or contained; anti-Semitism can be provoked or kept dormant; homophobia can be aggravated or kept under the surface—but the existence of the dangerous outsider always functions for women simultaneously as deception, diversion, pain-killer, and threat. The tragedy is that women so committed to survival cannot recognize that they are committing suicide. (1978, 34-5).

Brexit politics has brought the conservative, anti-feminist feminine into public focus to a degree not seen since Margaret Thatcher's reign – not least since the boys' brigade of Johnson, Gove and Farage was swiftly replaced by a female Prime Minister. Before the vote, writer AA Gill (2016) gave a scathing depiction of 'Little England' in female form: 'Middle-aged, middle-class, middle-brow, over-made-up, with her National Health face and weatherproof English expression of hurt righteousness, she's Britannia's mother-in-law. The camera closed in on her and she shouted: "All I want is my country back. Give me my country back."'. Yelling for the imaginary security of 'sovereignty' and the tightening of borders, this woman is not easily absorbed into left or feminist imaginings of the 'left-behind' of neoliberalism. Far easier to sympathise with the single mother, living in a deprived area of Manchester, who complains of 'the lack of a local park, or playground, and her sense that all the good stuff went to the regenerated wonderland of big city Manchester, 10 minutes down the road' (Harris 2016). Dworkin teaches us that disadvantaged women, too, may worship the bully who offers 'protection'; 34% of Trump voters in one recent poll are women (Johnson 2016). The election of Theresa May has, for

this writer at least, aroused distant memories of Margaret Thatcher and her use of imagery of domestic femininity to inculcate ‘macho’ neoliberal values (Hall and O’Shea 2013). Discourses of austerity, with their appeal to the fantasy olde Englande of thrift and moderation, have probably had some impact here, particularly on women old enough to remember lost decades which appear less materialistic, confusing and brutally individualistic than today. Women, in their cultural role as guardianesses of family identity and memory, are taught to nurture the domestic past; nostalgic ‘retro’ marketing is strongly directed at them (Negra and Tasker 2014). Post-crash austerity ‘chic’ meshed seamlessly in 2012 with a revival of nationalist symbolism during the London Olympics and the Queen’s Jubilee celebrations. Post-Brexit, it may take on a new vigour. Efficient housewifery gains importance in straitened times: and when (as Harris (2016) shows) all that the new economy can offer a woman worker is Universal Credit and cycles of zero-hour work alongside an equally exhausted partner, liberal notions of gender equality no doubt look like a dream for luckier others to nurture.

Post-truth, information ‘overload’ and gender politics

In light of the Brexit vote against a status quo presented as the only safe way by irritating ‘experts’, and the rise of Trump amid ludicrous promises of anti-immigrant walls paid for by Mexico, we can perhaps reassess the Nietzschean/ Foucauldian concept of ‘knowledge as power’ in the so-called global ‘information age’ – also the ‘post-truth’ era (Keyes 2004). As Harris documented (2016), the Leave majority was no shock to those who had talked to and listened to poorer and older British people, although it transpired that not many ‘experts’ had. This majority of elderly people, although better off than many young workers, have not had the chances or training to engage with the fast-moving global information-universe which the ‘cognitariat’ (low-paid knowledge workers) inhabit (Berardi 2005). Thus, like the working class and unemployed, they are the left-behind of the flexible, fast-moving knowledge economy. Knowledge has historically been hoarded and manipulated to keep certain populations ‘in their place’. If knowledge oppresses, frightens or threatens, then one way to feel more powerful is to subvert it through increased attachment to blind belief – anything that undermines the authority of the ‘experts’. It is this ‘post-truth’ approach that characterises much of the Brexit campaign, Trump’s rise in the US and, in an extreme form, Islamic State, which subverts the Qu’ran itself in order to further its immediate cause. Aggressive rejection of any information hostile to ‘our’ cause then provides a glow of subaltern righteousness, uniting those oppressed and disenfranchised by knowledge (Peter Cain, personal communication). Instinctive forms of ‘truth’ also flourish in the atmospheres fostered by social media whereby every opinion is as good as any other and impact is achieved via dominating attention with rapidly shifting and emotionally engaging imagery which limits the capacity for critical judgement (Sherwin 2000). Trump articulates the frustrations and confusion of a populace overloaded with clashing ‘facts’ and constantly exposed to quickfire emotional assaults, even as he bombards them with more of the same.

Post-truth campaigners do not necessarily have to have a clear programme to be successful: the feeling that the powerful are being viciously attacked is exhilarating in itself and will sustain the leadership for a long time. The fact that this may eventually lead to a mass of contradictory and competing policy claims is a secondary concern at the moment – and the moment is all that matters since, in a post-truth world, the future can be easily reinvented, as Orwell would have recognised. In the age of ‘information overload’, when knowledge increases at a dizzying pace, ‘know-nothingism’ among the left-behind will increase (Peter Cain, personal communication). The deployment of the language of victimisation by the new Right in both America and Britain (posing ‘feminazis’ and ‘left/libtards’ as intimidating bullies and enemies of ‘free speech’) fuels the widespread sentiment that political correctness is blocking the expression of home truths, particularly about immigration (Melossi 2000). Politicians such as Trump and Farage promise legitimisation of grudges the liberal world rules unspeakably offensive; Farage’s characterisation of Leave voters as ‘ordinary, decent people’ laid unspoken emphasis on their implicit condemnation by a snotty establishment. Harris (2016) expresses this as a sense that ‘no one is listening’ when communities change beyond recognition; although the comparatively low levels of immigration in most Leave areas perhaps tend to back the hypothesis that the devil you do not know is more terrifying than the one you do. There seems little point in denying that many poorer and older people (including many women) dislike large numbers of ‘foreigners’, or the very idea of them, coming into ‘our country’ (Melossi 2000). Brexit has simply given such durable sentiments the political legitimisation they had been denied for decades. Fears of the marauding foreigner, as Donald Trump (and, let us not balk at the comparison, Adolf Hitler) would attest, are powerfully immune to facts, and increase according to the relative distance of the offending object: for if I personally know and like a Polish person, it is that much harder for her to embody the disappointments and restrictions of my own life. ‘Bad’ immigrants are figured as mostly criminal males, although the excessive ‘breeding’ of female immigrants also causes concern. Dario Melossi (2000, 165) points out that most news stories relating to immigrants feature criminalised activity such as drugs, violence, or prostitution. Get rid of him/her and the fear-source is at least temporarily externalised and quelled. Certainty, rigidity, and promises to punish and banish the ‘dangerous’ appeal to both men and women, often more than shifting promises of fairness amid prosperity which leave too many behind.

It seems that ‘we’ – and in this ‘we’ I obviously include feminist academics – have perhaps misread (if not underestimated) the impact of globalisation and neoliberal eschatology on the left-behind. ‘We’ perhaps need to understand more clearly that the powerful symbol of the oppressed working-class woman may have misled us into incorrect characterisations of certain female populations, who do not see us as allies or representatives, but as irritatingly cosmopolitan, wet PC liberals who dismiss their very real concerns about the changes and dislocations that global neoliberalism and an angrily populist media have brought to their attention, if not necessarily their doorsteps. Perhaps we have overestimated the level at which *our* concerns for oppressed British women (real and crucial issues of poverty, domestic violence provision, racial equality, et al) actually mirror *theirs*. My other point is

perhaps more controversial; perhaps we should not focus so much on excusing harmful decisions on the part of 'oppressed' populations, and thus continue to configure them as vulnerable yet somehow saintly representatives of untouchably subaltern 'truths'. In the 'post-truth' world, we may do ourselves and feminism more justice by continuing to uphold versions of 'truth' which do not simply validate those of the angry majority. There is still room for standpoint theory, in that we must clearly learn to listen to and recognise the suffering, loss and anger of the female white working class. We must perhaps, however, stop asking only the questions we want to hear answers to. If working class women unfairly blame immigrants for their sufferings, to give just one example, feminism itself falls into its own post-truth by ignoring the angrier and more punitive aspects of this sentiment, or attributing it primarily to men. There is clearly a need for emphasis on the benefits of certain aspects of globalisation alongside anti-capitalist and anti-austerity campaigning: the new machismo of protectionist nationalism demands targeted feminist responses which directly address the alienation of white working-class women. In this brief intervention, I cannot set out what these might be. All I can say at this stage of the 'Brexit era' is that we urgently need to start dreaming them up.

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