SPACES AND SCALES OF FEMINIST ACTIVISM

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I would say that activism is, at one point, to ask the question of what world we live in. And to start trying to change it, at any scale.

Sofia Manseri 27 April 2016

Introduction

It is by no means new for women to be publicly claiming space and making their voices heard, as the recent commemoration of the suffragette movement in the UK made clear; the 1789 women’s march on Versailles also comes to mind (Zimmermann 2017). Women’s activism has taken centre-stage in the West since the election of Trump as President of the United States, in ways that are both unprecedented in scale and largely announced by other forms of activism that have been gaining momentum for decades (Currans 2017; Gökarıksel and Smith 2017). In the US context, as Nancy Whittier writes, ‘women of color and queer people have been leading some of the most vibrant protests of the past few years, such as Black Lives Matter, the Standing Rock Pipeline Protests, and the Dreamers movement’ (Whittier 2018). In other parts of the world, women have become the face of fights against oppression: the figure of Ahed Tamimi, the Palestinian girl who became an internet sensation for the footage that showed her slapping Israeli soldiers, is a case in point. Social media have given more women and girls, throughout the world, a voice likely to be heard worldwide and the ability to stage their own appearances and frame their own messages (Paveau 2017). Girls and women are made visible in such struggles, and they have moved beyond being mere abstract symbols (such as the bare-breasted Liberty, leading the way to freedom) to become actual political subjects, with names, voices and fully-fledged identities. Kurdish fighters in Rojava, north-east Syria, have been anointed ‘the most feminist’ revolution by world media. In many cases, however, it is still the images of voiceless females that capture the West’s imagination and go viral, especially when they revive well-known tropes and play on obsessions, as do the pictures of Iranian women removing their veils in a form of protest against the regime. How much women’s visibility amounts to ‘feminism’ remains contested – as it should, in a movement that is as diverse as the countries in which it emerges.

Feminist activism is a pursuit that is both situated and grounded in local contexts and is increasingly globally networked. How do we make sense of the forms, scales and spaces of
action and knowledge-sharing that are essential to feminist activism? This chapter attempts to map the spaces and places of feminist activism, speaking from the specific microcosm of French, particularly Parisian, feminist activism. It is important to state the place we speak from, per se, but we also want to argue that many discussions of activism from Anglophone perspectives to some extent miss the many spatial barriers that operate to keep feminist activism locally rooted and necessarily tactical in responding to local concerns and challenges (which may include imperialism from Anglophone countries).

This chapter also considers the increasing circulation of feminist knowledge online, and the relations between cyberactivism and other forms of activism. Drawing on material by activists from outside academia, within academia or lurking on the boundary (as is the case of an increasing number of researchers) makes it possible to question the ‘inside/outside’ division of feminism and the risks and gains from identifying as feminist in different environments and to document individual and collective strategies. This chapter deliberately references not only scholarly work on activism but work by activists, journalists and bloggers, all of whom, we argue, contribute to the advancement of both feminist knowledge and the entire cause. Despite the importance of intellectual pursuit and the thriving virtual mobilizations that take place online, we want to show how space still matters and that a geography of feminist activism is still needed.

Feminist tactics in academia spaces and knowledge production

The production and sharing of knowledge (as part of ‘awareness raising’) has long been a crucial part of feminist geography mobilizations. This raises the question of the specific role played by academics in the production and exchange of knowledge about women’s rights and feminist theories. Arguably, feminism is one of the strands of thought for which the overlap between academic knowledge production and activism is the most crucial and the most fraught, and it is also one of the sources of a major epistemological overhaul of social sciences generally. An important literature has developed over the years on teaching, researching and generally acting as feminists in academia, which questions universities as sites that reproduce a sexist and racist division of labour (Ahmed 2012), while emphasizing the potentialities for imparting ‘stealth feminism’ (Laliberté et al. 2017) and ‘dismantling hegemonic human geography knowledges’ (Johnston 2017, 650).

Much received wisdom and many canonical texts are steeped in patriarchy, making teaching against the grain particularly exhausting (if not outright dangerous, in some instances). Some take advantage of the fact that patriarchal structures are acknowledged as such in ‘other’ cultures and, therefore, work with this prejudice to illuminate patriarchy abroad before bringing the focus closer to home (where the assumption is that gender equality is a given, in the classical geography of sexism that we are brought up to believe in). Other instructors use similar prejudice about ‘the past’ being inherently more sexist to emphasize historical continuities and stories not only of progress but also of stagnation and backlash (Laliberté et al. 2017). The point is to take the familiar and show it in a different light and to question the normalization of everyday behaviours, and many pedagogical tricks are being shared over the internet and between colleagues. One example of this is the suggestion to begin a class on everyday mobilities with a question to both male and female students about what precautions they take to avoid rape and sexual assault when going out. The responses are likely to open people’s eyes about the very unequal degree of freedom that women and men experience in public space.

Feminist geography pedagogy does not occur in classrooms only, and much of it takes place over the internet and social networks. Though masculinist and sexist ideology also has massive
platforms there, those willing to educate themselves are likely to find ample resources in many forms. Our specific challenge as academics is to shape this knowledge into formats that will be accepted as valid in scholarly settings, even as many of our colleagues are teaching differently and might try to undermine what we teach. This, however, should not come at the cost of the vital critical component of feminist activism. Scholars of colour such as Sirma Bilge have expressed concern about the ‘whitening of intersectionality’ (Bilge 2015) and the ways in which it has become the object of abstract scholarly discussions that side-line women of colour and marginalize racialized knowledge producers, which is a critique to be taken seriously.

The separation between academic and non-academic knowledge production and activism is blurred, to some extent, by the relative accessibility and low status of universities and research institutions in the French context. They are not where French elites are reproduced, and the knowledge produced there is often disregarded or dismissed by policymakers or people in power. But, simultaneously, there has been an overbearing tradition of ‘axiologic neutrality’ enforced in French social research, based on a partial and distorted reading of Max Weber to dis-credit the then-powerful Marxists, which a new translation is helping to lay to rest. This means that it has been easy to disqualify feminist research and challenge its status as valuable scholarly contribution on the basis that it was ‘biased’. Though it may seem counter-intuitive to people outside France, who perceive the country as a purveyor of critical and feminist theory, there is a striking illiteracy among French decision-makers about gender, in general, and a corresponding side-lining of academic research.

In 2017, an academic conference on intersectionality in research in the field of education came under threat because, in the context of French elections to the presidency and the Assembly, political groups claimed that it was spreading a dangerous ideology (in particular toward high-school teachers, who were supposed to attend as part of their training). This controversy, like many others, began with attacks through social networks. The head of research at the university of Paris-Est Créteil claimed that the organizers had been gratuitously provocative by including the image of three ‘Rosie the Riveter’-inspired figures on the conference flyer (see Figure 39.1), and asked for it to be removed. This instance of censorship goes to show that feminism, in particular of the intersectional persuasion, is all but normalized in our academic environment, and remains controversial.

### Cyberspace and social networks: a new public space for activism?

There is consensus among scholars that new means of communication, such as social networks and the internet, have worked wonders to counter the silencing of oppressed minorities and to allow for efficient networking of resistance movements (Tufekci 2016). Arguably, a worldwide campaign such as #MeToo would have been unthinkable before the global spread of such networks and the development of specific skills to gain attention and exert pressure, thanks to international public opinion. They do, however, also create an unprecedented means by which to target, survey and harass those very movements and minorities, as the example above shows, and there are difficulties inherent in translating viral internet campaigns into successful mobilizations (Tufekci 2016). These developments have brought about new and more complex ways of thinking about space(s) and how activism is likely to unfold spatially: cyberspace reflects issues that play out in all sorts of other spaces, in terms of access, authority, who is widely heard and who is harassed into withdrawal or silence. While many long-overdue conversations have been started by the #MeToo movement, the backlash is strong, organized and with unprecedented access to traditional channels of communication: The Dutch activist Flavia Dzodan has discussed how the public and the private, formerly thought of as discrete
Figure 39.1  Flyer for May 2017 conference at Université Paris-Est as initially designed (the final version had only the image of the children).
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entities, are becoming blurred as women in the public space of cities are designated as ‘fair game’ and alt-right representatives make themselves at home on the internet (Dzodan 2016). There is an ongoing discussion on the efficiency of ‘cyberfeminism’ in respect of traditional forms of feminist mobilizations (Blandin 2017). The case of the Parisian collective Le Seum offers some perspectives on the part played by social media in feminist organizing.

The Le Seum collective takes its name from the slang word seum, from an Arabic word meaning venom (avoir le seum is a phrase commonly used to express anger and disgust). It was created in 2016 during follow-up discussions after the Marche de la Dignité of 31 October 2015, and gathers people who experience one or several forms of systemic oppression based on gender, sexual orientation, race, class, religion, and so on. This membership responds to the need, in the French context, to oppose the strategic deployment of concerns that claim to be feminist against racialized minorities (Farris 2017) and to couch feminist engagements in terms that resonate with working-class populations and counter the othering of people of Arab descent (hence the slang). Both Sofia and Roxane are part of the subgroup Le seum des meufs, ‘women’s anger’, which has been actively taking part in demonstrations, actions and elaborating feminist knowledge in the shape of collective texts, podcasts, and so on, for the past two years. The group initially met on Twitter, sharing anger and disgust as France rushed headlong into a nightmare of Islamophobic repression after the November 2015 attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis. Le Seum therefore addresses specific French challenges (how to talk about racial discrimination when the word ‘race’ is considered taboo, for instance) and local issues (in particular, the divide between Paris and its suburbs, and the difficulty of organizing across this divide), and discusses Anglophone references such as Anne Fausto-Sterling or Valerie Solanas (along with French classics such as Colette Guillaumin). Both Sofia Manseri and Roxane Bettinger are sceptical of the efficiency of international networking or hashtags such as #MeToo, and emphasize the importance of acting locally, debating and convincing locally and exerting pressure on decision-makers, rather than relying on a surge in awareness of issues (which always takes place once-removed, because of the linguistic barrier and the fact that such movements do not feel immediately relevant to their struggles).

The group communicates by private subgroups of social networks and, though it holds meetings once a month, Sofia Manseri emphasizes that, for its members, ‘compulsory physical presence is what kills movements, and allows some people who can always be present to seize power’. Roxane Bettinger praises online private communication as offering a ‘space for expression, exchange, support and activist production’ and considers the internet to be ‘crucial’: in this space she first came in contact with feminist struggles, developed knowledge and made a large number of friends.

This does not entail a withdrawal from more classical forms of organizing and mobilizing. Both Sofia Manseri and Roxane Bettinger try to forward feminist ideas in their professional environments and make them part of their personal engagements (Manseri as a local elected official, Bettinger as a teacher). Besides demonstrations, members of Le Seum are engaged in tactical tagging of pavements to advocate for legalization of reproductive assistance (ART) for same-sex couples, a creative claiming of urban space inspired by similar tactics by La Manif pour Tous, a strongly reactionary movement that mobilized against same-sex marriage in 2012 and 2013. Using stencils, members of Le Seum very cheaply and effectively cover up the anti-abortion tags that proliferate in the wealthier parts of Paris (Figure 39.2). Roxane underlines the profoundly gratifying result of marking space and putting a message out in physical space (as well as contesting the perceived enemy’s dominance over space on its own territory).
Knowledge production has been tremendously accelerated and has benefited from a large number of contributions from many sources. However, it seems important to emphasize the distortion that comes from many ‘global’ conversations, which take place mostly in English. In France, for instance, this is off-putting for many, who feel that they cannot participate fully in

**How space still matters**

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*Figure 39.2* Messages stencilled over anti-abortion slogans on Paris pavements: ‘Procreation without fear or father’, ‘Access to abortion’ and ‘Reproductive technologies for all’. Photograph: R. Bettinger.
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the conversation since it is dominated by Anglo hegemony and answers to political contexts too alien to mean much in the French national context. The failure on the part of US-based critics to appreciate the extent to which making sense locally might be more important than fostering a worldwide discussion is one of the aspects that Currans underlines in her chapter about the Toronto slutwalks (Currans 2017). The issue is all the more important in countries in which English is not the most commonly used language, because the issues translate differently and the slogans need to take on other forms to function effectively. Cross-cutting questions such as reproductive rights, access to abortion or protection from sexual violence gain from international solidarity, but they have to be reworked in response to the dissimilar local priorities, legal frameworks or political and media discourses. Thus the construction of transnational coalitions is fraught, as is the building of local solidarities. Language constitutes a barrier to fully globalized conversations. Debates or issues that are thrashed out in the English-speaking parts of the internet enter our academic and activist environments only partly, and remain highly contested (with an ongoing feud, in France, between those who have adopted the perspectives of queerness and those who find it depoliticizing and insist on materialistic approaches).

As an example, much was made of the fact that the Women’s March was replicated ‘worldwide’, when in fact the size of the demonstrations in those countries outside the US to a large extent correlated to the proportion of English-speakers and/or size of the US expat community there. In many countries, the demonstration served as an opportunity not only to showcase local issues related to women’s rights but also to protest US imperialism. In Paris, it was considered irrelevant by most of the women’s movements from deprived neighbourhoods, as only mainstream and White-identified movements had been called on to take part in the Trocadéro gathering and march. Its very location in the wealthy Western part of Paris, familiar to US expats but alien to most working-class women, spoke volumes about the way in which it was planned and received locally.

There is a sense in which the fragmented social geography of the French capital is translated into fragmented mobilizations that seem impossible to reconcile. The overarching yet unacknowledged colonial matrix of the entanglements of sexism and racism reinforces this fragmentation. Racial divides loom large, and with the added twist of official colour-blindness. Thus, in the summer of 2017, when the Afrofeminist collective Mwasi organized a festival in which some sessions were exclusively for women experiencing racial discrimination, it was dragged through the mud as a ‘racial discriminator’ and communitarian (with Paris’s nominally left-wing [Socialist] mayor, Anne Hidalgo, weighing in to declare the event unacceptable and trying to have it prohibited).

There is also a demonstrated difficulty for women or gender minorities to gain a significant part in movements in Western cities that rely on a lengthy occupation of public space and/or high-risk protest tactics in the face of police violence, with similar problems arising in the US Occupy movement and the Parisian Nuit Debout (Hancock 2017b; Hurwitz and Taylor 2018) While it is particularly challenging to have bodies socially constructed as vulnerable or illegitimate out in space, there is also difficulty in gaining admittance for minority voices in some supposedly ‘umbrella’ feminist movements. Some prominent figures in the Parisian administration who claim to be feminists have publicly reviled intersectionality as an abomination and criticized the import into French debates of concepts that they claim are alien or servile imitations of Anglophone thought. Thus, the very term ‘genre’, the French translation of gender, is considered unacceptable by many Parisian decision-makers, who stick to the essentializing phrase ‘equality of women and men’ and refuse to consider contestations of gender binarism to be relevant to feminism.
Those who trouble these understanding of women, such as openly Muslim women, racialized, queer or transgender people and sex workers, remain *persona non grata* in the institutional demonstrations that take place on 8 March. While officially sanctioned demonstrations such as the Women’s March take place peacefully and with police protection (especially when they comprise a majority of White faces: see Zimmermann 2017), in France at the moment the less-consensual and more-radical feminist demonstrations are exposed to police brutality and intimidation. For instance, at the Parisian ‘8 mars pour touTEs’ alternative march in 2016, the police arrested some demonstrators who were wearing BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) T-shirts, with the clear objective of intimidating all participants. What counts as acceptable feminist intervention and what is to be violently repressed is the object of unclear ideological decisions: the FEMEN, who bare their breasts to protest about various figures and movements,\(^6\) seem mostly to escape unscathed, as does the collective *La Barbe*, whose members wears fake beards to protest against men-only or particularly homogeneous male events of various sorts.\(^7\) Conversely, when the demonstrators include other political agendas (such as anti-racism, gay and lesbian and trans rights), they are more likely to be considered dangerous radicals and be disciplined for it. This is in conformity with the official government line on feminism, which stresses (White, middle-class) women’s rights to public space, even as it stigmatizes ‘less respectable’ women.

This echoes the transformation of many urban spaces by gentrification, which has co-opted ‘women’s safety’ under the pretext of enforcing greater surveillance and eradication of ‘undesirables’ (Listerborn 2016). A new urban space being produced and marketed as ‘safe’, ostensibly in response to feminist claims of a ‘right to the city’, may be spatially reproducing other exclusions. For instance, the city of Paris’s drive to fight sexual harassment targets specific areas and populations on the frontline of gentrification, where the issue is perceived to be most acute, while downplaying the harassment taking place behind closed doors in places of work or study.

**Becoming mainstream, becoming universal?**

There is a threat inherent in feminism becoming ‘mainstream’ and co-opted by (diluted in?) social justice movements – as it is likely to become subordinated to other struggles and objectives, even as it is being paid lip service and de-politicized by institutions through ‘gender mainstreaming’ policies. Nancy Fraser has expressed fears that feminism has become ‘capitalism’s handmaiden’ (Fraser 2009), and there are also legitimate concerns that, in Europe particularly, it plays into the hands of nationalism and racism (Farris 2017). Beyond these most unsavoury tendencies, there is a general risk for feminism to be co-opted and de-politicized by institutions and governments and, increasingly, to take forms that are at odds with the everyday lives and struggles of those women for whom it means the most.

The varying degree of responsiveness by local governments to feminist advocacy accounts for the strikingly different ways in which the European Charter for the Equality of Women and Men in Local Governments is being implemented. This transformation sometimes takes a reassuring form, for instance in the case of Barcelona, where Ada Colau, a former activist for housing rights, is defending a need to ‘feminize politics’, which has become a slogan for municipalist movements. This is to oppose the virilist face-off between Spain’s central government and Catalan independence advocates, for instance, but also to welcome migrants, in contrast to nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies across Europe. The municipality is currently implementing an ambitious and well-funded plan for ‘gender justice’ and fighting the ‘feminization of poverty’, and its organization includes a service explicitly devoted to ‘feminism and LGBT’. The specificity of the situation in Barcelona arguably owes much to the fact that the
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mayor herself and many on her team come from activism and have brought their concerns and ideals effectively into city management.

Thinking more generally about what seems new in current activism, one fascinating and relatively recent development is the way in which movements initiated and led by women (not all of whom would necessarily define themselves as feminist) have increasingly become inclusive ‘umbrella’ movements for many struggles against injustice, not restricted to women’s rights or issues coded as feminine. In addition to the ones listed by Whittier, above, the Women’s March federated a large number of protesters with a variety of concerns, among them the environment, social welfare, racial justice, immigration and LGBTQ issues (Fisher, Dow and Ray 2017; see also the collection of ‘rapid responses’, edited by Moss and Maddrell 2017). Another local example is the Parisian Marche de la Dignité, in 2015, a women-led movement protesting against police violence, racial discrimination and the stigmatizing of working-class neighbourhoods (Hancock 2017a).

This suggests that women’s activism, or feminist activism, is no longer seen as ‘specific’ or niche but has actually gained a place in universality (Husquin 2017). This might point to a resolution of what was termed the ‘Wollstonecraft dilemma’ by Carole Pateman (1988), or the intrinsic paradox of feminist claims, according to Joan Wallach Scott (1997); that is, the need to embrace the specificity of women’s condition in order to erase it or make it irrelevant to citizenship rights. At the time of writing in early 2018, it seems that the cause of equal rights for women has become a central part of every struggle for equality, rights and social justice. But maybe the sense of novelty is also part and parcel of what the feminist movement is about: as Jo Reger (2018) points out, in the movement’s history both its death and rebirth have been reported regularly.

Notes

3 For a discussion of the Marche de la Dignité, see Hancock 2017a.

Key readings


References


