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gendering the recession: media and culture in an age of austerity

Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2014, 320pp., ISBN: 978-0-8223-5696-7, £15.99 (Pbk)

Reflecting on the emergence of a 'quasi-feminist vocabulary' in popular media culture, Angela McRobbie (2008: 532) has criticised feminist scholars' tendency to offer too positive a response to 'popular feminism'. Too little attention has been given, McRobbie argues, to the exploitation of feminist vocabularies for the fashioning of postfeminist neo-liberal subjectivities, and to the limitations of the commercial sphere as a site for the articulation of radical political demands. McRobbie's call is for serious critical engagement with the political and economic conditions that shape and circumscribe popular media culture (*ibid.*: 539)—for nothing less than 'the resuscitation and re-conceptualization of feminist anti-capitalism' (*ibid.*: 548).

McRobbie's intervention (published during the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, but presumably written before it) offers, I think, a way in to the evaluation of *Gendering the Recession*. The financial crisis, the global recession and widely adopted austerity measures can be seen as phenomena that provide an opportunity for feminist scholars of media and culture to evidence their critical engagement with economic conditions and to offer an account of the neo-liberal instrumentalisation of feminism in consumer culture. Indeed, this opportunity could hardly be passed up: feminists in the UK, the USA and the EU have presented a vocal argument about the impacts of austerity policies on gender equality (UK Women's Budget Group, 2010; Abramovitz, 2012), and it has become clear that austerity policies will bring 'severe hardship' for women (Rubery, 2014: 33). In what ways, then, do the contributors to Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's book engage with the economic? What contribution does the volume make to the feminist analysis of popular media culture? And what can it tell us about the nature of the challenge that McRobbie lays out?

From a methodological perspective, what is perhaps most notable about the book is that it is composed almost entirely of text-based analyses. Audience and reception studies are absent, and passionate identifications with fans of popular culture—of the kind McRobbie is particularly critical—seem remote from this book's interests. Instead, the book offers sharp and often highly persuasive readings of the extent to which (post)feminisms have been co-opted to neo-liberal projects in the 'age of austerity'. This is powerful and

valuable stuff, but it is notable that multiple, contestatory or conflicted readings of the texts in question are rarely elaborated (though Sinéad Molony's discussion of post-'Celtic tiger' documentary has this dimension). While the chapters in this volume never fall back on reductive ideology critique, neo-liberalism's capture of feminist energies reads as thorough-going and uniform; we don't see many contradictions, chinks or cracks in its surface posited here.

Another effect of the sidelining of audience-engaged research is that the book offers very little sense of the pleasures and attractions of recessionary culture, without which it is difficult to understand how and why gendered subjects have acquiesced to the logics of austerity. The editors' brief discussion of themes of resourcefulness and thrift (which is somewhat extended in Elizabeth Nathanson's analysis of the figure of the 'recessionista') covers some of this ground, but it lacks a sense of the other imperatives—such as the environmental crisis—that contribute to the foregrounding of these themes in the age of austerity and of the subjectivities that accompany them.

There has been a significant shift in recent years towards new modes of engaging with the economic. Grossberg (2010) has, for instance, urged scholars in the humanities to begin 'rescuing economies from economists'. The task in hand is founded upon a 'destabilization of the category of the "economic" as clearly distinguishable from other social phenomena' (Mark Hayward in the volume reviewed here, p.9)—or an attempt, as Skeggs (2014: 4) puts it, to think economic and non-economic forms of value together. It is hardly surprising, then, that the contributors to this book avoid the kind of industry-oriented analysis that is often associated with a reductionist political economy approach to media culture. Instead, Pamela Thoma's discussion of the forms of creative work that are sanctioned for women and Sarah Banet-Weiser's framing of advertising as economic practice indicate alternative ways of engaging with the creative industries.

Gendering the Recession indicates that the challenge of invigorating feminist critique of neo-liberal capitalism has been widely and enthusiastically taken up, while the age of austerity has served as an opportunity to evidence this activity. Yet it's clear that we—feminist scholars of popular media culture—don't yet know exactly what the analysis of a destabilised category of the 'economic' might involve. We remain, I suggest, in the early stages of thinking about what McRobbie's challenge really means for the critique of popular media culture, particularly when it comes to questions of method. This is hardly a criticism for *Gendering the Recession* to bear alone. If it is not yet clear what a more economically minded, 'anti-capitalist' approach to the feminist analysis of popular media culture might look like, *Gendering the Recession* is of value both for the quality of the readings it collects and for the extent to which it crystallises the challenges that persist.

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doi:10.1057/fr.2014.57