

We need to look at how we can build bridges and build solidarity

Finn Mackay

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Your books outline the complexities and different traditions and positions within radical feminism, and a key point of your work is to reclaim or demarcate radical feminism as a project which isn't trans-exclusionary. Can you summarise what 'radical feminism' means?

Radical feminism shares the same overall aim or agenda that all feminism does: an end to sex discrimination in present society. It involves an end to sex discrimination in every area of life: in employment, culture, domestic life, representation, media....everywhere! As a branch of feminism more generally, radical feminism shares the aim of ending sex discrimination, and of ending discrimination and unfair treatment of women *vis-a-vis* men; but as the name suggests, radical feminism then goes further: because it says that sex discrimination is not the end point, it's a step along the way towards liberation – and that *is* the end point. So ending sex discrimination is an important goal, but it's not the liberation of society from patriarchy and patriarchal governance, which for me radical feminism has as its as its more radical aim.

In my first book, *Radical Feminism*, I explain how radical feminism can be distinguished from other schools of feminism that people might be familiar with. At school and college, when people do social sciences, they tend to study what are called 'the big three': liberal feminism, socialist feminism and radical feminism. As part of this there are often a lot of myths that people are told about radical feminism. Certainly, I see that in my incoming students who are doing social sciences and who, along their learning journey, have gleaned that radical feminism is the most extreme version of feminism – one that thinks all women are better than all men, and which wants to put women in charge instead of men. And that's certainly never what radical feminism argued for in the past, or argues for now. Radical feminism can be distinguished from those other schools, I would say, by four main features. One is it that accepts the existence of patriarchy - of male supremacy - as a *fact*, rather than a theory. That's not to say that all men are in power in all institutions. The men in powerful institutions are men that tend to be from elite, powerful backgrounds, and in this country tend to be rich white men from very particular backgrounds ~~with the same handful of skills~~ who have all been to the same handful of private schools and universities. There are rich women there too, but we don't see 50% of them in power, and so our major institutions

of power are overwhelmingly dominated by men. I think the term for that is *a patriarchy*. Some other schools of feminism would disagree, and would see that as, for example, a symptom of capitalism. Whereas radical feminists would say that patriarchy is not just an offshoot of something else, but rather a form of social governance that we live within at the moment. It's real.

Second, radical feminism promotes and creates opportunities for women-only organization. This is very different to separatism. It promotes and creates women-only leadership, women-only spaces, and women-only organization on the principle that the people most affected by a structural oppression should be the ones leading the social justice movement to end it. Third, radical feminists view sexualized male violence against women and children as a cornerstone of women's oppression that needs to be accounted for. And I would say that during the second wave in the late 1960s into the 1970s and early 1980s, across the Western world, it was radical feminists who really wrote the book on what male violence against women is: what it looks like, ~~##e~~ why it happens, and how it might be ended, at a time when other schools of feminism were not doing that work. They were basing that work on ground-up theorizing coming from consciousness-raising groups, the early refuge movement and the early Rape Crisis movement. And then, fourth, radical feminists extended that analysis of male violence against women and gender-based violence and the significance and importance of studying that to also critique the institutions of pornography and prostitution, which remains a very contentious area within feminism, and one that different schools of feminism have quite different views upon. So I would say that those are the four things that distinguish radical feminism from the other schools. But it shares the same aim, as I think all forms of feminism do: of looking to end blatant sex discrimination against women. We're all working towards that, in every area of life.

You identify as a radical feminist and you also discuss how that tradition sprung from socialist feminist, anti-racist and anti-war traditions. Reading your work it seems very clearly coming from a left perspective to me, and increasingly so in its critique of conservatism; and yet I also noticed that your earlier book featured endorsements from right wing feminists such Nimco Ali. Could you talk about how you relate to left politics and the socialist feminist tradition?

Yes, Nimco Ali endorsed my first book, which is quite odd now that she's a goddaughter to Carrie and Boris Johnson's child and an advisor to the Conservative Government. I would hasten to add that when she gave that endorsement I knew her through community and grassroots organizing against female genital mutilation in London and Bristol. She was working with young people on that, that's how I knew her. That was quite a long time ago and at that time she wasn't an advisor to the government. I wouldn't ask her to endorse anything now!

How does my feminism relate to left politics and socialist feminism? Well, I identify as a socialist. Not as a socialist feminist, because of the issues I've already outlined; as I think socialist feminism historically hasn't paid enough attention to male violence against women, which is an area that I've just been involved in so much, working on policy and activism. So that's very important to me. But I've always worked alongside socialist feminists. I always find those women to be very hard-working comrades who are always on the frontline of the

most current and important struggles, many of whom I return to for comment and analysis on current issues -- especially if I'm not sure exactly what I think about certain current events. So yes, I'm a socialist, I've always been on the left, and I've always been involved in left wing-organizing in terms of activism and protesting. Since I was a teenager I've been involved in the women's peace movement: I left home to live in a women's peace camp. But during that time we were also involved in campaigning against the Criminal Justice Act, for example, which was the right thing to do, as it was a crackdown on people's right to protest as well as the free rave movement, on new age travellers and just on alternative lifestyles.

My parents are socialists. My dad gave me his copy of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* when I was a teenager and said it was one of his favourite books. He was a joiner and a builder from a very rural working-class background. It's increasingly important to me. I've taken my son on Kill The Bill demonstrations and protests against the actions of this current government. I'm a member of the Labour Party: I'm a Corbynista, and proud to say so, although at the moment I haven't renewed my subscription just yet. Part of me believes that passionate, left-wing people should not leave the party, because that's what right-wing members of the party want; and another part of me just can't bear to carry on paying my membership subs at the moment [when Labour is so right wing]. I recently got a letter from the Labour Party urging me to continue paying, and in that letter they said, oh, please be assured that that we are rebuilding the party, and you can pay your subs knowing that. I found that really offensive. I thought...rebuild it from what? From over half a million members, from being the largest democratic socialist organization in Europe? 'Rebuild it'.. it was already built! And now you're busy smashing it.

I met Jeremy Corbyn a few times when I was involved in CND, as he's the Vice President. I've always been a trade unionist, from my first proper job in local government; when I was a youth worker I was a member of Unison, and I'm now a member of UCU. Collective left wing organizing and solidarity along structural issues is the most important thing to me. Although my latest book focuses on quite a specific issue, that's because I see it as part of the broader culture wars, and as part of efforts to divide people -- to continue down a road of ever-increasing, vicious right-wing conservatism that would be happy to continue to try and turn this country into a nation of oligarchs. I think the more we can all work together to preserve the [democratic?] structures we have, and to build better ones upon them, the better.

I agree. How would you define 'the gender wars'?

Well, I don't like militaristic language, and the term itself, 'the gender wars' is militaristic. It suggests that there are these two clear warring camps that have clear sides. I don't think the term itself is helpful. But then again it's also become a shorthand, and most people recognize it as a commonly-used term, so now it's in mainstream culture. And what people think it refers to -- and certainly what the media presents it as -- is a battle that is theoretical, but also about policy and legal issues, between women, and women who are feminists on the one hand and trans women on the other hand. I think that's what most people see 'the gender wars' as; and that's certainly egged on by famous names like the author J.K. Rowling writing her statements on sex and gender, the pronouncements of MPs and the pronouncement of ministers, and what they focus on is women's objections to trans

rights and trans inclusion [rights?]. So I think that's what it's seen as in popular culture: it's a war, it's a competing ~~uple of~~ ideas, and laws and policies and rights between women and between trans people.

I think the gender wars are part of the broader culture wars, which is an attack on the small steps of progress that social justice movements have made over the years. I think the culture wars are part of larger fractures and shifts as old elites who are dying out are trying to maintain power. As we go through a period of economic chaos and even more economic and environmental and social uncertainty these culture wars are increasing. People are increasingly drawn to them because, in this period of instability, they are being sold an idea of a rose-tinted past which was more stable: one that we can all look back on which often hinges around an idealistic idea of the heterosexual nuclear family where 'men were men' and ~~or~~ 'women were women'. It presents the idea that everything is so chaotic now, but at least in this mythical past people knew where they stood: they had dedicated roles, children were raised well, you left your door open, communities were safe and people looked out for each other. There's at's a universality, unfortunately, about the culture wars, and that's why it's so powerful, as it signifies so many things. People who are against immigration are well into a lot of the narratives from the culture wars: people that don't want more migration into this country, people that are racist, people that don't support divorce, people that are against abortion, people that are homophobic, people that don't want trans rights.... it attracts a lot of people all under that one banner of culture wars. I think attacks on trans people's rights are one component to that. It's a backlash against the small steps of progress that have been made: an attempt to re-solidify and future-proof power by elites.

You write of how you are situated in an interesting or nuanced way in relation to the gender wars – a position that crosses dividing lines – how the unique position of your queer butch female masculinity means you are an 'insider-outsider'. Can you explain that and outline that for us here?

Ever since I was young I've been involved in activist organizing. When I went to university and did my undergraduate degree I was in the Lesbian and Gay society, as it was called, and we organized for LGBT officers and Pride events and inclusion events. When I lived in Leeds I was involved in the early organization of Pride there. So I've always been involved in LGBT activist groups, and obviously in LGBT communities and social spaces. Since I was a teenager I've also been in feminist spaces and feminist activist spaces, and I've very much been involved in in feminist organizing, in terms of my work and career in the women's sector as well. And what I know, and what anybody in either of those communities knows, is that they overlap. They are all mixed together. There aren't dividing lines between them, you know: there are people working in the women's sector who are LGBTQ. Likewise, there are feminists working in LGBTQ organizations and activism: all of these things overlap, because people have multiple identities and multiple parts of themselves. And so that's another reason why I wanted to write the book about what was happening in in the gender wars: because I know that they aren't two discrete and warring camps. I know that they overlap, and I know that not least because I've been involved in both myself at the same time.

I've also been involved in creating social spaces for butch and femme lesbians, transgender and trans-masculine identified people. And you know those communities don't feature so

much in the gender wars, because the focus and the scrutiny is very much on trans women. Whenever trans men or trans masculine people or butch lesbians or masculine women get mentioned it's often in quite an infantilizing way; they are constructed as convenient victims. Gender war narratives will say that people are 'being transed', they're being brainwashed, that there's some sort of attempt to 'steal those people away' to a trans identity. And these borders between female masculinity and butch lesbian masculinity, the question of what is a transgender identity or trans male identity: well, we've been having those debates ourselves within our communities for years for as long as I can remember, and for as long as I've been in them and we managed to have those debates and disagreements and arguments with each other. But what's happened now with the gender wars is that people from the outside, who are often *not* from those communities themselves -- and, in fact, in many cases are heterosexual women -- people are now on the outside looking in and scrutinizing and pathologising communities that I've been part of, are using issues that we ourselves have addressed and discussed, and then have weaponized them to attack trans women. So that's another reason why I feel have a stake in this. Another reason is that, on the other hand, I did not like to see feminist theory and particularly radical feminist theory, a lot of which I subscribe to, again being used to attack another minority group, to attack trans women.

And as part of talking about your position, you talk about different positions you've held at different times in your life – tomboy, butch lesbian, thinking about trans but not having surgery, rejecting then embracing 'queer', becoming queer butch. It's a very moving and frank - and also a very three-dimensional -- account of intersectionality, and of assemblages of gender, in their wider social context. Why was it important to you to write about your personal history in this book, and was it difficult?

It didn't ~~it didn't~~ come easily to me, I have to say. Although people who might have seen me talk at big events might think that I'm quite full of myself, or quite happy to talk about myself or to be the centre of attention, for me the issues are the most important. I usually don't see why I should have to, in effect, 'send myself' into them. I also object to these narratives we see in our culture, so often, which is that you *have* to have personal experience of something before you can care about it. I think that narrative is very widespread. You'll see people doing something for charity because they or a loved one have been personally affected by it; or you'll see people saying oh, since a friend or whoever has been sexually assaulted or in a domestic abuse relationship, now I'm really passionate about campaigning against it. I think that's actually something that we need to get over as a society. We shouldn't have to wait until any of us have personal experience of some sort of injustice or tragedy before we can see that the injustice and the tragedy is wrong and that we should try to do something about it. So that's why I don't usually like to centre send myself ~~in~~ things: instead, I usually like to say, right, here are the issues: we should *all* care about these issues.

But with this book I didn't want to be seen as a tourist. I didn't want to be seen as just jumping into this debate, into the fray, just to start talking about the gender wars because it's so 'current' at the moment. I didn't to be seen as opportunistic, although I knew that people would accuse me of that anyway. They do on social media: I get plenty of 'oh now

you've changed your career to write about the gender wars, because that's the current trend, because trans is trendy - you're a careerist, a sellout who used to write about male violence against women and children'. I know some people will do that anyway. But I suppose, for all the people that I know in the transgender and queer and trans communities and for my own involvement in that, I wanted to put on the record that I do have a stake here: I'm not a tourist, I'm not jumping on a bandwagon, I've long been involved in these communities. I've long cared about them, and I myself have wrestled with differences of identity, identity terminologies, of where I best fit. I have experienced hostilities against me personally as well because of how I present, and because of my identity and who I am; so it didn't come easily at all. The last thing I wanted is for people to think that I was centering myself or making it all about me; but on the other hand I very strongly didn't want to be seen as jumping on a bandwagon. I wanted people to know this wasn't disingenuous, I do have a stake here, I'm writing about this with integrity, I am upset with a politics I subscribe to being used to bash another community who I also stand with.

Your new book provides a vivid sense of the complex histories of feminism, showing how for example how both trans-exclusion and inclusion was part of the second wave. It critically unpacks where 'gender critical' feminism comes from and its range of perspectives, as well as conflicts within queer and radical traditions and spaces. I really like the discussion of 'feminist faultlines', as you call them, which provide a prehistory to the present. For instance, you discuss and contextualise how a spiritual 'woman-loving' cultural feminism which scapegoated butch lesbians and queers as representing the patriarchy, emerged. Do you think we need a much better and wider understanding of these historical feminist faultiness and their difficult legacies?

We can dream! I'm sure everybody from their own particular social justice movement would wish that mainstream culture had a better idea of their histories and political underpinnings and were taken seriously as political and theoretical movements. That would be great, but I don't think it will happen, because mass media has got a very shallow understanding of feminism. It tends to focus on consumer choice as representative of feminism, when, of course, it isn't at all: consumer choice has got nothing to do with feminism, although feminism could certainly have a critique of that. But that's the dominant media narrative of how people they engage with feminism. Or the media y use feminism to pit ck women against other women in some sort of catfight - that's another thing they love to do.

I know from going out and doing public events -- book festivals, speaking events, book groups, workplace talks, or whatever - that in mainstream culture, most people are not really sure what feminism even is, or what feminism as a movement even means: what it wants, what it's trying to get, who a feminist is, or what it means to be one. I think that's deliberate as well, because I think feminism as a radical movement to change the current system does present a threat to the status quo. Feminism has been wilfully misrepresented, reduced and demeaned as some shallow but tenuous entity. It's for that reason that we've been able to be sold these lies, that feminism is having a tote bag that says 'feminist' on it, or Theresa May wearing a T-shirt that says 'this is what a feminist looks like'. It's a sign of the times that people are not only willing to accept those things but will buy into them. So I can't really see the wider culture getting to grips with those with those histories happening.

I also think history books, textbooks and political commentators often hugely overlook the cultural influence of the second wave women's liberation movement. If you look at the 1970s and how changes were beginning in terms of people's lifestyles -- people experimenting with communal living, with polyamorous relationships as a political act, with raising children communally, with raising children against consumer culture and trying to do things differently -- all that that was a lifestyle movement informed by politics. There were consciousness-raising groups and women's groups in every little village, town and city across the country. It had a huge impact on relationships and culture, on relationships between men and women, and on what those could look like. I think that was partly why the 1980s then came along with all the individualistic movements that we're familiar with: there really was a huge backlash against that freeing, and quite radical, influence that women's liberation represented.

Today, with the gender wars I don't think people are going to go back and look into this history, and that was partly why I wanted to write the book. I wanted it to be as simple and as clear as possible to provide people with a potted history and to say to people look, it's not as clear-cut, and as simple and binary as you might think, or what you're being told. What you see in mainstream media, remember there is a history to this, so don't just accept the media's largely [reductive account of feminism and gender politics]. Again, this is what I get asked at events: well what exactly does feminism say about about trans people? Is feminism always transphobic? Do you have to be transphobic to be a feminist? These are the sort of questions that I get. So I wrote the book with that in mind. It's not an abstract theoretical academic book; I wanted to try and explain and contextualize for people where the current gender wars have come from. I hope that people reading the book will be given a bit of that background, and know that these narratives comes from somewhere, that it has a history for different reasons; and that the women who have a politics and ideology of trans exclusion - although I don't agree with them, or go along with them – also has a theoretical history and a background. And, of course, also that we shouldn't reduce everything within the gender wars to a 'TERF versus trans women' battle. It discusses all the really significant legacy-building trans women that were involved at key moments in the second wave. There were trans women living in lesbian feminist communes, in public women's publishing houses, in women's music production, in women's organizing conferences, in bands: women like Sandy Stone and Beth Elliot. Trans women were there, and involved in the women's movement. Again, that gets erased when we just simplify everything to this whole 'TERFs against trans women' narrative.

So much gender critical feminism argues that queer/ gender analysis is 'anti-materialist'. On the contrary, you write 'The question has never been whether biology is real, because of course it is; the question is what does it mean, where does it matter and what should it mean in the future'. I agree, and I like this formulation. Can you say more on this? For instance, are you arguing for a better materialism, a more capacious understanding of how bodies are sexed and gendered in history and society..?

One thing that that queer activists, the queer movement and trans people get accused of is of ignoring or denying biology. That charge being put against trans people who have transitioned is especially ridiculous because, as if people who have taken steps to bring their

biological features into line with their ~~our~~ identity to shape their bodies into ways that are most liveable for them, as if they wouldn't be aware of the materiality of the body! They have - of course they're aware of the materiality of the body. And then there's accusations, you know that ~~the~~ queer activists want to pretend that that sex doesn't matter, or pretend that sex doesn't exist. I don't think actually anybody is saying that. Then there is a lot of actual misinformation: a while ago there were major stories in the mainstream press saying that Brighton and Sussex NHS trust would no longer use terms like 'mother', 'pregnant mother' or 'breastfeeding' -- that they were only using terms like 'uterus haver' or 'chest feeder' and 'pregnant person'. This turned out to be an absolute fabrication. What Brighton Trust was doing was working with people to produce a booklet for midwives who might be working with queer and trans families in order to provide a glossary of terms they might need to know, preferred words that they might want to use, a bit of background about the trans community and trans rights -- specifically for working with trans families, not anybody else. If you believed everything that you read in the press, you would think that there was quite a lot of negative things happening: you'd think language was being taken away, that most services being were renamed or changed, when, in fact, what is actually happening is people who were historically excluded and who never even had a name, never even had a term, who were fought against and treated like apparent freaks, are now being included, that's all. That's what is happening: people who were historically excluded are now being given names and being included. That doesn't take away from groups and identities that have always been included, and always had names and widely understood, recognized labels in there.

But such stories are behind this idea that the queer movement wants to 'erase sex' and other terms: I don't think that's true. That's not what I see. In fact, if you look at queer writing, it's always involved deconstruction, but it's not been about pretending that these material features are not there. Judith Butler is often attacked. Butler's first book was *Gender Trouble*; in the second, *Bodies That Matter*, they had to point out some of the misreadings of that earlier work: that most babies are born with external genitalia and assumed reproductive systems that, in general, will fall into two main categories that we sex as male or female. At the moment bodies have sex differences, and that matters in terms of how we have relationships, how we have sexual relationships, how we might want to become parents, how we might want to carry or birth children if that's possible, it matters for our health needs. Of course all that matters, and nobody's denying that; but on top of these features of the body we have a very conservative gender system which then seeks to construct people in the image of the two available binary genders, masculinity or femininity. I think it's that which queer theory has most critiqued, and argued should be taken apart, because that's built on sex differences of the body. But then you look back to radical feminist writing of the 60s and 70s which said, well sex should cease to matter as a cultural marker: there are differences between bodies, but having one particular sex characteristic shouldn't invoke or confer power. These features of the body could be neutral in terms of politics and status; the body of course is never neutral in terms of its needs and protections and healthcare and care. So all this is to ask questions about why, *politically*, does sex mean something and why culturally does it mean so much. I think what we see at the moment is very reactionary conservative sex and gender movement, one that really wants to reinstate this idea of women and men as a separate species. To me, that is the very foundation of patriarchy and is anti-feminist.

Another thing I like about your book is that it's both capacious and generous yet doesn't lapse into a liberal middle ground position – it's clear about the extreme violence done to trans people whilst it also unpacks the complexities of a wide range of different feminist positions. I also liked how you try to learn from past examples to suggest what could have been done better: for example, how the Michigan Women's festival could have been more inclusive. Would it be accurate to say you are concerned with developing an approach which is about learning and reconciliation? Is that your peace background coming through..?

Yes, and I suppose that relates to where I cut my political teeth - in never-ending circle meetings trying to make decisions by consensus! I can for example remember endless discussions into the night about single incidents. Like: was a woman throwing a cold mug of tea over an American soldier at the gate of a military base, so that it went through the holes in the chain link fence and onto his uniform, an act of violence? Should we all agree that we *don't* do that, because he didn't know the tea was cold -- he didn't know that he wasn't going to be splashed with boiling hot water, he might have been fearful about that and so could have reacted more strongly, with more violence... you can see, it can go on and on and on! So yes, maybe that experience is coming out. I have also known so many occasions where it really doesn't have to be an issue -- where women's groups and women's activism and women's organizing has included trans women, and that has not been to the detriment of anything -- in fact it's *good* for women's groups and women's organizations to build solidarity and to work with other women. We know that the women's movement has excluded lots of different women at different times, and isn't immune to racism and classism like the rest of society. So activism should be a leveller. It should be a zone in which we can occupy a critical more open and questioning space: never escaping the wider society that we're in, but trying to create a more questioning, free space, a space where we mix with lots of other people, and meet with people from backgrounds that we're not in the least familiar with. That's where I end up at in the book: that we need to look at how we can build bridges and build solidarity.

*You have spoken elsewhere of knowing people who hold very different positions (for instance you talk about knowing and joking with Julie Bindel whilst you both hold wildly different perspectives) which will resonate for anyone who has been around feminist activism or politics for a while.¹ You also say in *Female Masculinities* that the vast majority of people aren't sure what they think about the gender wars, and that you aren't even sure what you think about everything, e.g. children, medication and the age of transition. So do you think it's important to talk across divides, and to register both nuance and uncertainty? Are you trying to build better understandings across what you call this 'brutally polarised' divide with its 'rush to litigation'? (p96).*

Yes, absolutely, because I think if we don't all talk about it in the particular groups and circles that were in, then what we all have is people talking *for* us; and, at the moment, those very loud voices do tend to be from highly conservative sex and gender positions. It's been a long time coming, of course, but we've seen the recent move in in America to curtail

¹ Gaby Hinscliff (2021) 'Finn Mackay: the writer hoping to help end the gender wars', *The Guardian*, 5 October. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/05/finn-mackay-the-writer-hoping-to-help-end-the-gender-wars>

women's rights to abortion with the overturning of Roe Vs Wade. That happened very quickly, but of course religious conservative groups and right-wing groups have been working for that for decades. We can't be complacent, because that decades-long work then comes to fruition, and when it does it can happen very suddenly: institutions that were seen as untouchable can be ripped apart literally overnight. I think that especially right now, we need to be looking at all that we share together, and we need to be very suspect of sex and gender conservative voices who will speak for us. There are so many groups out there who want to tell us what we should think of trans people: that they're all deviant, that it's some sort of perverted movement to corrupt children and to gain access to women's spaces in order to abuse them -- we're being fed that narrative all the time. It's a broader anti-gay and homophobic message as well: it would see us back to some sort of Clause 28 situation, which we can already see happening in this country. There are sex education curriculums being taken to court, being attacked, being taken to judicial review because people don't like the fact that they are LGBT-inclusive. We have MPs and ministers reassuring people that children won't learn about 'the gay lifestyle' too young: this is a real backward step. And it's happened because the people in the middle, that are respectful and that mix with lots of different people, and don't want to offend anybody, and just want to get on with their own lives and for everyone else to have the right to get on with theirs, have felt frightened and disempowered to talk to each other about it. Into that void has come vicious and visceral sex and gender conservative right-wing voices. And if we don't take that narrative back, a fast train to Gilead is what we're on, which is what I said in the book -- and, in many ways, we're several stations along.

The book argues that the greater enemy of both camps in 'the gender wars' is the religious conservative right and male violence: that this is what needs to be focused on. I completely agree. To some extent the gender wars are being encouraged to detract from this – it's quite explicitly the agenda of right-wing politicians in many countries, including the UK. How can we reconnect resistance?

I think that's a really interesting question for social justice movements at the moment. Having been involved in direct action and peace activism as well as campaigns specifically around the Criminal Justice Act, I now see the Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill coming, and the attacks on the right to protest; and whilst I know that we can protest and that there is resistance in the Kill The Bill movement and demonstrations, it does all feel quite fragmented. Over the years, the new Labour government as well as the Conservatives have taken away the structures that enabled people to do things differently and enabled them to protest and resist. It's harder now to claim unemployment benefit or welfare; it's harder to find short-term housing; because of CCTV everywhere it's harder to flypost; there's no such thing as short-term squatted housing any more; people are not able to set up communes and co-ops. The machinations of activism have been made more and more difficult or impossible against the backdrop of neoliberal brainwashing. That has really had an impact, and means that although we're seeing now a familiar 1980s /1990s-style attack from the government on people's freedoms, we're perhaps not seeing a 1980s-style uprising against it. Where are our massive poll tax riots, where is our mass resistance? The mechanics that enabled them have been taken away.

However, what we've seen again during the pandemic was the rise of mutual aid movements and of community organizing. I think that attacks on the right to protest actually have facilitated this: the fact that protest was banned forced people into adopting 1980s-style DIY activism. During Covid I saw call-outs for demonstrations which would say 'called by nobody, organize yourselves! Some of us will be meeting here at this point, do whatever you want!'. I recognized that DIY style from the 1990s, and people have been forced back into it by necessity through it becoming illegal to protest at all. All those the long-winded systems that people got used to were taken away -- getting a form, getting permission to have a road closure, getting permission to use a piece of public land, working with the police -- all that went out the window. Instead, we saw a more spontaneous kind of DIY activism; information would go around on social media -- 'people are all gathering here to say that we're angry about this' -- and then people would go down there, but as it wasn't organized by anybody nobody could be fined for doing so. I think that's really interesting. I hope that the current attacks on the ways people can protest will force people into more DIY community ground-up resistance and organizing.

However, I don't think that the Tories are stupid; I think they know that people will resist. And they're building more prisons! They're quite happy to bring more people into the criminal justice system. But that's why I think it has to be mass protest and resistance; and I think maybe these developments of the mutual aid movements are rebuilding how people organize and make those networks together, for their mutual aid. Well, I hope so anyway.

It's interesting to think how that might connect with abolitionist feminism.

Exactly, yes, in that it's more spontaneous, it's grassroots. You know, there's pros and cons with all of that, but all resistance is good.

Finally: you've been involved with a range of feminist activism and work – women's peace camp, founding member of EAWW, founder of London Feminist Network and reviver of reclaim the night marches. How has the traffic between activism and academia shaped both your writing and your activism?

I don't really think of myself as an academic because I'm in a [post 1992] university where the bulk of my work is teaching: we don't really have research time. So I mainly think of myself as a lecturer or a teacher. When I was very involved in activism I was frustrated with a lot of feminist academic texts that I thought were very dense, overly wordy, and overly theoretical; because although I often found them interesting, they didn't address the concerns of activist groups or provide things that activist groups might need. When I was very involved in activism people really wanted grand overarching theories like women produced during the second wave. Because it's one thing to know what you're against, but we also need to know what are we *for*. What would a different world look like? It's become a cliché, but actually such a question is really important to activists. Because being an activist involves asking structural questions: what do we want and what would it look like? What would doing this differently look like? These are strategic questions and they involve trying to build our own political strategy. Again, and wilfully, government and mainstream media narratives often demean and dismiss [this](#), and treat such large questioning as something frivolous or indulgent precisely to stop us building it up.

So I was frustrated that academia didn't provide that. I still am actually, even now; all the time I see how ideas and trends are being shaped by the main journals in the English language, and by how you get a 'big name' on one topic and then they're the ones that are always cited on that topic forever. It's bizarre crazy, it's quite narrow. Academia is it's own game and culture, isn't it. Within that game you're not encouraged to do what people were allowed to get away with in the second wave in the 1970s. I think if Kate Millet, for example, tried to write *Sexual Politics* now, let alone Shulamith Firestone's work - there's no way any of that would get published as a piece of academic work because it's grand theory, it's women's own views and ideas and visions about how things should change. And that's not seen as rigorous, or having appropriate referencing, or as being 'proper' academia. So sometimes I'm quite frustrated with that, and I've been told on several occasions that my work is too journalistic, too popular, too crossover, not academic enough. But I take heart from the fact that also people go out of their way to contact me, or to find my work email and say that my books or writing has helped them to understand the particular current issue or has helped them finally know what particular terms mean. That's what I think academia should be about: using concepts and ideas to contextualize current events that matter to everybody.