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Cover photo: Students in Bangladesh protest 7.5 per cent VAT on their tuition fees, 10 September 2015.
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Karolina Szpyrko, 'Review of *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between Empowerment and Vulnerability*, 2017, by Aristeia Fotopoulou'

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Reviews

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*Feminist Activism and Digital Networks:
Between Empowerment and Vulnerability,*
2017, Aristeia Fotopoulou
London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

Aristeia Fotopoulou's study in digital and feminist networks, developed from her PhD research project, is a highly perceptive, critical journey, meandering through today's feminist and queer activism. The book's main concerns are how feminist culture and politics become incorporated into digital networks; what does it mean for a digital network to enter the, often personal, sphere of activism as an embodied practice?

An empirically informed project, *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: Between Empowerment and Vulnerability* makes use of ethnographic research and in-depth interviews with a variety of feminist and queer groups in both on-line and off-line contexts. Each of the chapters focuses on a different aspect of activist culture in relation to the struggles and potential that it faces within the digital environment. As such, the primary aim of the book is to explore how activists understand and negotiate concepts of community, citizenship and networks through their uses of digital technologies. The findings are then used to develop new theoretical concepts: networked feminism and biodigital vulnerability for further discussion on feminism and digital media.

As established in the book's title, Fotopoulou is interested in the 'in-between': the contradictions and tensions underpinning the interchange of long-standing feminist debates and the materiality of the new digital culture. As she explains:

There are contradictions between inclusion and exclusion in new communicative environments; between representation and materiality; between articulations of opportunity and realisations of impossibility; and, perhaps the most important tension for activists in the digital era, between vulnerability and empowerment. (Fotopoulou, 2017, p. 1)

Vulnerability in networked culture, then, becomes the central concept of the book. The notions of feminist and queer corporeality, biopolitics and technology are here developed through the influential work of Barad, Braidotti, Colebrook and Haraway. The book extends the discussion on the relationship between the digital (material) and feminist (bodily) onto modern types of online activism.

Fotopoulou employs two analytical, theoretical lenses through which she discusses feminism and queer politics and cultures. The first one is *biodigital vulnerability*. Although the recognition of the corporeal common vulnerabilities as significant tools in articulating political claims is nothing

new in the gender studies (e.g. Butler, 2004), Fotopoulou manages to rediscover the concept thought applying it onto digital sphere of activism. She stresses the productive potential of the vulnerability and affect in collective action and networked activism. Since feminist and queer activist acts occur at the intersection of the digital and life technologies, they open up a new aspect of marginalised subjectivities, political disadvantages and vulnerabilities which can have great political potential when made public. As she explains:

biodigital vulnerability helps us understand the complex dynamics of content production and control that constitute online networks as contradictory spaces of both vulnerability and empowerment for feminist and queer politics. (Fotopoulou, 2017, p.4)

This remark seems especially important when we consider how the shift of power to the user in digital sphere has been happening vis-à-vis the progressing surveillance bringing an inevitable threat of exposure.

Secondly, Fotopoulou introduces a concept of network feminism, understood as everyday negotiations between feminism and media technologies. The key aspect of networked feminism is how its communicative practices and digital identities are shaped by the social imaginaries developed around the internet. In other words, the extent to which the promise of the internationally networked communities impact on the real-life activist practices within different feminist and queer groups. The concept allows Fotopoulou to explore how five key elements of digital media technologies are mediated by activists: access, connectivity, immediacy, labour and visibility. She argues that, through these elements media technologies are problematized and constitute an ongoing process of feminist and queer redefinitions.

Employing these two concepts in relation to the recent debates in critical social theory and biopolitics in digital networks, Fotopoulou retrieves the

importance of feminism for digital and activism studies. The author argues that the politics of feminist and queer activism in social movement studies have been either studied as ‘finished’ projects or overlooked as too niche areas of interest to engage wider scholarly attention. This study is a call to see activism as an embodied set of practices, lived experiences and imaginaries that are reformulated and re-enacted in the digital sphere. As such they constitute a response, a counter-balance to new forms of governmentality underlined by neoliberal modes of productivity and widely discussed technoscientific acceleration of time.

Chapter 2, based on research with feminist groups in London, explores how the libertarian promise of Web 2.0, as openness and community empowering, actually influences and informs activities and agendas of the feminist activist. Fotopoulou argues that, while technology provides new opportunities and tools for feminist content to be spread and shared, it also becomes a medium through which inequalities, vulnerabilities and disagreements within feminism are reformulated. Here, she further discusses the social imaginary of ‘networked feminism’ and ‘digital sisterhood’ in a context of digital platforms which, on the one hand, enable traditional feminist politics of connectivity, affect and sharing of experiences, while, on the other, deepen already existing exclusions related to ageism and material inequalities.

In Chapter 3, Fotopoulou addresses a long-standing debate in feminist scholarship on pornography and discusses the political potential of queer and feminist porn productions in relation to the contemporary postporn politics. Her analysis focus on the contradiction between empowerment and vulnerability of practices within digital porn platforms. As she claims: ‘Self-exposure and surveillance in digital culture have a double edge – both empowering for female users, and at the same time, risky and potentially harmful’ (Fotopoulou, 2017, p.61). Contrary to previous scholarly opinions that bioart and sex-positive blogging are subversive ways of resisting

heteronormativity, Fotopoulou argues that digital porn remains part of neoliberal politics which ‘produce new commodified connections and subjectivities of consumption’ (2017, p.80). At the same time, feminist and queer digital porn practices can also produce new accounts of biodigital vulnerability, and ways of negotiating subordination. Fotopoulou concludes that awareness of the history of pornography and politics of such industries, queer and postporn networks can constitute a powerful political tool of empowerment. It needs to be stressed that, yet again, in the digital age when ‘participation’ becomes converted into hidden labour, and queer visibility can be easily exoticised, all activist, political endeavors are almost trapped between promised empowerment and inevitable vulnerability.

In Chapter 4, Fotopoulou turns to topics of biotechnology and the ways in which female bodies and are controlled, asking about the relationship between development of reproductive technologies and production of knowledge in feminist networks. Here again biodigital vulnerabilities carry a special importance in a discussion of networked feminism, its political potential and struggles, as both reproductive and hidden consumer labours on digital networks cannot be conceptualised outside of gender. In this chapter, Fotopoulou analyses feminist networks as alternative sources of knowledge about reproductive technologies and fertility policies. Although the research exposes a number of contradictions which occur at the intersection of feminist politics of reproduction and neoliberal discourses of individual choice, Fotopoulou argues the struggle to seize control over one’s body and subjectivity of experience still remain the drive of feminist networks.

The final chapter addresses the importance of digital networks for queer activism. Based on her ethnographic research on anarcho-queer activist group in Brighton called Queer Mutiny, Fotopoulou discusses the tensions between ideas and imaginaries about queer global activism and how their activist practices are materialised in a context of neoliberalism and the ‘pink

pound'. The findings show that educational, community building and creative activist practices off-line, alongside production of online content, play a crucial role in a project of queer 'world-making' and the connecting of LGBTQ histories with future goals. Fotopoulou argues that the production of activist creative content is essential in creating alternative queer cultures, a sense of belonging, as well as celebrating a variety of different queer subjectivities and experiences.

Fotopoulou's *Feminist Activism and Digital Networks: between Empowerment and Vulnerability* proves to be one of the most important publications in the field of networked activism and biodigital politics. The book successfully engages in a number of recent debates in media studies, critical social theory and biopolitics in digital networks, and guides the readers through the digital reformulations of feminist politics and debates. Importantly, by conceptualising the interconnection of materiality of the digital sphere and corporeal experiences and vulnerabilities, the publication creates an innovative and interdisciplinary framework for further research in digital activism.

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