

“Meghan’s Manifesto”: Meghan Markle and the Co-Option of Feminism

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On 21st May 2018, two days after Prince Harry and Meghan Markle wed at Windsor Castle, the *Daily Mail* published the headline “Meghan’s Manifesto: ‘proud feminist’ the Duchess of Sussex will take the royals in a striking new direction”. The piece by royal correspondent Rebecca English – part of thirty-one pages of wedding coverage – described in celebratory tone how Markle’s “candid” biography on the official royal website highlights a host of work dedicated to “social justice and women’s empowerment” (2018:1), appropriating the language of feminist activism to describe a “manifesto” of objectives.

This approach to reporting upon the new royal is far from unique, with headlines like “Why the Royal Wedding Is a Coup for Feminists” (Wright, 2018) and “How the Duchess of Sussex is smashing the royal glass ceiling” (McGoogan, 2018) abounding across news, comment and women’s magazine titles alike to position the event as a feminist, post-racial utopia: a bi-racial, divorced, self-proclaimed feminist, American actor “modernising” (Duncan and Low, 2018) an ancient patriarchal institution. The representation of people of colour in the ceremony, from the African American pastor to celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Idris Elba, has been interpreted as Markle disrupting monarchical status quo through a ‘rousing celebration

of blackness' (Hirsch, 2018), as if signifying her power to alter monarchical tradition according to her personal agenda as a feminist of colour.

Indeed, the uniformly positive tone heralding a new era of royal feminism is so unwavering that it at points reads like doctrine, with a failure to enthuse about the royal couple interpreted as a failure to support the intersectional feminism she supposedly represents, and criticism is therefore read as misogyny (Ruiz, 2017) or racism (Communications Secretary, 2016; @RoyalReporter, 2018a). Critique of Markle is thus swiftly and vehemently rebutted. The royal correspondent for the pro-royal *Daily Express* announced the need to block people on Twitter because the abuse he received was so severe (@RoyalReporter, 2018b), and Rebecca English was threatened with an acid attack in response to an insufficiently effusive tweet (@RE_DailyMail, 2018).¹

Whilst Markle identifies as a 'proud feminist' and has undertaken work with organisations such as the UN with some emphasis on women's issues (Davies, 2018), the rush to hail her a new feminist princess is at points a little strained. Her wearing of trousers to royal events has been cited as evidence for her being a thoroughly modern woman despite being popular since the early twentieth century, as modelled by the Queen Mother on a royal tour in 1925 (English and Seamark, 2009). Similarly spurious is the suggestion that opening the car door for Harry is a "very significant" moment for feminism (Rach, 2018). This over-statement of the feminist significance of every small detail of Markle's public appearances enacts shifting terms of debate around feminism

¹ The tweet which made the threat has been removed but the thread showing people reporting the violence remains.

in the popular imaginary. As Hamad and Taylor argue, ‘discursive struggles over the meanings of feminism are now, perhaps more than ever, largely staged in and through [...] celebrity interventions’ (2015).

While we are not discounting that Markle may indeed identify as a feminist, and may even have aspirations to use her royal platform for the benefit of women’s issues, there are broader issues at play here around her star image being used to define contemporary feminism, and how this feminism is co-opted and policed by institutions with distinctly anti-feminist principles. The day after “Meghan’s Manifesto” was celebrated, for example, the *Daily Mail* published an opinion piece by Sarah Vine (a journalist with close connections to the Conservative party due to her marriage to MP Michael Gove) in which she argues that Markle’s feminism has gone “too far”, modernising too much, too quickly (Vine, 2018). “I just wish they would be a little less #MeToo about it all,” laments Vine, in a perfect example of anti-feminist “backlash” (Faludi, 1993). Whilst one could say that this constitutes a criticism of Markle, crucially, it holds the line that Markle does indeed represent a new feminist order, and is therefore part of the consensus surrounding a supposed moment of radical feminist change.

If Markle’s feminist influence on the monarchy is indeed “rewriting the royal rulebook” (McGoogan, 2018), traditional monarchical values are explicitly positioned in contradistinction to feminist principles. Raka Shome has described the monarchy as “the ultimate establishment of British national patriarchy” (2001:324), and indeed it is built on the subjugation of women’s bodies as biological machines to reproduce heirs (and hence, reproduce hereditary power): Henry VIII and his wives being the ultimate example. Despite having a female at its head, primogeniture was only replaced in 2013,

and given that Princess Charlotte has an older brother, this change has had little tangible effect. Mediations evoking Markle as monarchy's feminist antithesis are not going to dismantle the structural patriarchy and privilege the monarchy relies upon. Indeed, Markle's status relies largely on the institution; she is now the Duchess of Sussex, or Princess Henry of Wales, afterall. Instead, she has been tasked with giving these structures new life and relevance. As demonstrated by the claiming of Markle's biography on the royal website (The Royal Family, 2018), and the celebration of this in the right-wing press (English, 2018), Markle's "female centered" humanitarian work will now be co-opted as part and parcel of (re)legitimating monarchical power.

It is clear, however, that this is a feminism that is being carefully policed. While Markle walking alone down the first half of the aisle has been widely celebrated as a feminist statement (Barr, 2018), Prince Charles walking her to the alter can be read as placating traditionalists, so the more progressive elements are being tolerated rather than embraced. Writing about the regulation of Diana's femininity, Raka Shome evokes her entrance into Westminster Abbey for both her wedding and funeral as "show[ing] the guarding, surrounding, ownership and definition of white femininity by national patriarchy" (2001:329); mitigating and reclaiming the damage Diana's post-divorce public persona had wreaked on the monarchical institution. The image of Markle on the arm of the same man is a powerful conciliatory tool. Furthermore, despite the ideological disruption of Diana, representations of Kate Middleton's conservative and traditional femininity (Allen et al., 2015; Clancy, 2015) demonstrate the monarchy has not changed, and the myths of the absent mother or the adulteress that Diana had invoked are now safely contained.

What does this suggest for the models of femininity Markle can perform? It has already been demonstrated that Markle's activist voice has been either silenced or appropriated by the monarchy: she has quit her acting career, closed down her popular blog and social media accounts for all her online activity to be ciphered by Kensington Palace (Patel-Carstairs, 2018), and a blog post she wrote on menstrual stigma has been co-opted for her official biography on the royal website (The Royal Family, 2018). Buckingham Palace has been criticised for only belatedly including reference to Markle's six years on the TV show *Suits*, after its absence from her official profile was conspicuously noted (Perring, 2018). This suggests that not only are Markle's previous platforms being reignited, but also that the Palace find it somewhat regrettable, perhaps even embarrassing, that she ever previously had a public voice. Meanwhile, Markle is said to be receiving "Duchess lessons" from the Queen's advisors, "to be brought up to speed with protocol and expectations of life with the monarchy" (Davidson, 2018) in a conservative, upper-class makeover reflecting the gendered, class, and racialised ideologies of reality television show *Ladette To Lady* (Redden and Brown, 2010). While the monarchy appear to be celebrating her diversity and modernising influence, then, this is only permitted within prescribed boundaries.

It is also striking that the left-wing press have been overwhelmingly pro-royal wedding. *The Independent* published a piece entitled "Why I'm coming out as a secret royal wedding fan" (Rentoul, 2018); *The Guardian*'s Hadley Freeman argued "Thanks to the new Duchess of Sussex, Prince Harry may well turn out to be good for Britain" (Freeman, 2018); and *New Statesman* suggested "Meghan Markle is the princess to cheer up feminists" (playing to a well-worn stereotype of the humourless feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2010)) (Urwin, 2017). All factions of the media have hence bought into

the dominant narrative and suspended critique of power dynamics, in favour of interpreting multiculturalism and feminist ideas as de facto progress; demonstrating how Markle is an effective tool for repositioning the monarchy as an institution.

The contortions required to maintain this necessary blindspot are typical of a postfeminist media culture that celebrates “defanged, non-oppositional invocations” shorn of emancipatory potential (Rottenberg, 2018; see also Foster, 2015), pivoting instead on notions of choice. Hailing Markle as feminist enables the monarchy to construct a performance of progress at a time of a ‘proliferation of new and old misogynies’ (Gill, 2016:619), whether in the US presidency, online trolls, or neo-nazis. Thus, a celebrity (post)feminist such as Markle is of great value to a British monarchy keen to set themselves apart from these other forms of patriarchy and to mask, or at least deflect attention from, their own intensely problematic relationship with issues of race, gender, class and religion. What is at stake here is much more than representations of one woman and the meanings contained therein; it is the meaning of feminism itself as popularly understood. This is a definition of feminism that resides in a vague idea of modernisation and makes no reference to equality between the sexes. How could it, when the very concept of monarchy enshrines Harry’s structural superiority over Meghan?

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