
Gendering the Recession (2014) extends the critically important work that Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker began with their previous edited collection, Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture (2007), which has become an invaluable resource for feminist scholars researching contemporary representations of gender in popular culture. In this new collection, Negra and Tasker have brought together a wide array of essays written by international scholars examining how the 2007–2008 economic crisis altered and reshaped contemporary cultural understandings of femininity and masculinity. Importantly, this collection maps out for the reader how gender is re-imagined and/or reconstituted through recession-themed media. By doing so, the authors challenge the culturally pervasive post-feminist and neoliberal discourses that proliferated after the economic crisis, which celebrated and privileged individual solutions, self-branding and entrepreneurialism, and personal responsibility over governmental or legal reforms, as a way to manage the financial downturn. As Negra and Tasker comment in the introduction, media studies allow important examinations of how “media texts offer reassuring vignettes of individual agency as compensation to the ill-defined yet intensely valorized power of the market” (p. 2). The book therefore serves a double function: examining the recession’s impact on media culture, and how cultural forms mediate gender-based experiences of the recession.

One of the key assumptions that the book critiques is the commonly held belief that the economic crisis erupted into a crisis of (white, heterosexual, middle-class) masculinity. Terms like “he-cession” and “mancession” (Chapter 1) were coined by writers to convey how men were hit harder by the economic crisis than women. Indeed, much was made of the job losses suffered by men working in the manufacturing and construction industries. Yet, as Suzanne Leonard explains in the first chapter, these types of jobs have been declining since the 1970s, and actually represent a small percentage of the total jobs lost as a result of the economic crisis. These cultural anxieties have been taken up in a variety of media exploring changing roles for men, especially the stay-at-home father, who is often represented as an emasculating figure forced to rely on his wife for support. Thus, there is an underlying current in these media texts that blame the recession for upsetting traditional gender roles—men are no longer able to provide for their families and no longer have a clear understanding of their social role. As the book authors demonstrate, these anxieties and fears underpin a number of entertainment and consumer culture formats from advertisements (Chapter 3), domestic horror films (Chapter 6), and popular literature (Chapter 8).

The flip-side of these recession era depictions of masculinity in crisis has been the proliferation of articles and images of women who are supposedly prospering in spite of the recession, suggesting that the gains achieved through the feminist movement have put men and boys at a social and economic disadvantage. Indeed, according to women’s media and literature genres, women have been able to apply their feminine-skills to overcome and/or successfully self-manage the economic crisis. This can been
seen in the growth of fiscally-minded consumer discourses embedded in feminized yet entrepreneurial figures, such as the “recessionista” and “frugalista” (Chapter 5), as well as the growth of what Pamela Thom a (Chapter 4) calls “priv-lit,” a sub-genre of “chick-lit” that sells “stories about self-making that involve [women’s] upscale consumption” (p. 113). Here the premise is that women must spend in order to find personal or spiritual fulfillment but also to keep the economy up and running. These ideas also structure postfeminist chick flicks such as Julie & Julia which draws on neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurialism to unproblematically valorize women’s free and flexible labour as the solution to a sluggish job market. This is a reoccurring theme in many of the chapters, which demonstrate how women and girls who fail to achieve post-feminist gender and class ideals are put on display and shamed, as some authors found in Irish documentaries (Chapter 7) and British reality TV makeover shows (Chapters 9 and 10). Indeed, as Isabel Molina-Guzmán argues in Chapter two about Modern Family’s Latina character Gloria, resistant ethnic and classed femininities are ultimately contained by media texts, which “consistently rearticulate traditional conceptualizations of [white, heterosexual, middle-class] femininity and masculinity” (p. 78).

Overall, the authors do an excellent job debunking many of the myths about women, men, and the recession, which combine to paint a very nuanced and complex picture of the intersection of gender, class, and race in recessionary culture. The book’s strength lies in its broad coverage of many media forms and sites of investigation, and each chapter provides a wealth of content—historical, cultural, political, and economic—which is rigorous and well-researched. The book is somewhat limited by geography, and only covers American and some white European countries, like Ireland and Britain; thus, some offerings that dealt with the gendered effects of the recession in other nations or cultural contexts would have been welcomed.

Finally, while other books have tackled the issue of women, men, and the recession (see Antonopoulos, 2013; Karamessini & Rubery, 2013), Gendering the Recession offers a fresh approach by examining the cultural and media response to the 2007–2008 economic crisis. Taken as a whole, this collection illustrates in great detail how the recession stoked the flames of so-called outdated claims of gender inequality by both blaming women/feminism for the decline or loss of jobs in male-dominated professions, such as finance and manufacturing, while also celebrating young women’s entrepreneurial spirit and ability to succeed in spite of their limited employment opportunities post-recession. Overall, Gendering the Recession fills an important niche within feminist media studies by offering a gender critique of the recession-themed media that has sprouted up in recent years. This book will be invaluable to teachers and students studying contemporary representations of gender in a post-feminist neoliberal era.

References

Natasha Patterson, Simon Fraser University