

Institution: University of Cambridge
Unit of Assessment: UoA32A
Title of case study: Feminism and the limits of choice
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Dr Clare Chambers, a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Philosophy, works on feminist issues in political philosophy. The ideas in her book, <i>Sex, Culture and Justice: the Limits of Choice</i> (2008) have had a significant impact on public discourse, via two routes in particular: (i) through their advocacy by the 2012 equality campaign group <i>UK Feminista</i> , and subsequent media attention; and (ii) through Chambers' participation in a public discussion at the Institute for Public Policy Research.
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) Dr Clare Chambers has been a lecturer in the Faculty of Philosophy since 2006, and was promoted to a Senior Lectureship in 2010. The underpinning research for this case study was presented in her book, <i>Sex, Culture and Justice</i> (2008) [3.1] and her article 'Feminism' (published in 2013, but circulated widely before that) [3.2]. Liberal political philosophy puts the concepts of equality and freedom of choice at the heart of its vision of the just society. In <i>Sex, Culture and Justice</i> , however, Chambers argues that a just society cannot be grounded solely on the fact of individual choice. She begins from the observation that autonomous individuals often choose to do things that harm themselves or undermine their equality. In particular, women often choose to participate in practices of sexual inequality-cosmetic surgery, gendered patterns of work and childcare, makeup, restrictive clothing, or the sexual subordination required by membership in certain religious groups. She goes on to argue that this predicament poses a fundamental challenge to many existing liberal and multicultural theories that dominate contemporary political philosophy. She argues that a theory of justice cannot ignore the influence of culture and the role it plays in shaping choices. If cultures shape choices, it is problematic to use those choices as the measure of the justice of the culture. Drawing upon feminist critiques of gender inequality and poststructuralist theories of social construction, she argues that we should accept some of the multicultural claims about the importance of culture in shaping our actions and identities, but that we should reach the opposite normative conclusion to that of multiculturalists and many liberals. Rather than using the idea of social construction to justify cultural respect or protection, we should use it to ground a critical stance toward cultural norms. The book presents radical proposals for state action to promote sexual and cultural justice. One case that is of particular relevance to this case study and that Chambers discusses at length in her book is cosmetic surgery (for example, breast implants). Many women feel that their lives would be improved by such surgery. Chambers argued that these views are ultimately damaging to women and to their equality, even if the decision to undergo these operations is taken voluntarily. So a genuinely just society – which aims at equality – ought to limit voluntary choice.
3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references) [3.1] Clare Chambers, <i>Sex, Culture and Justice: The Limits of Choice</i> (Penn State University Press 2008) [3.2] Clare Chambers, 'Feminism' in Michael Freeden, Marc Stears and Lyman Tower Sargeant (eds.), <i>Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies</i> (Oxford University Press 2013)
4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words) <i>Sex, Culture and Justice</i> has had an unusually significant impact on public discourse, perhaps because, as one reviewer put it, 'Plenty of feminists have tried to write books that have an impact on – in the sense of altering – mainstream, androcentric, liberal theory. But they have sometimes failed, perhaps because they are too dependent on jargon peculiar to gender studies, or because they do not engage enough with liberal theorists' recent debates and preoccupations. Chambers's book deftly avoids both of these problems, so there is real potential here for this book to alter mainstream liberal thinking' Faith Armitage <i>Feminist Review</i> (2009) 91: 200–203 [5.1].

Two examples in particular illustrate how the book has had an impact on public discourse:

1. Adoption of Chambers's work by the UK *Feminista* campaign in 2012 and subsequent media appearances

The *Feminista* campaign argued for a legal ban on the advertising of certain cosmetic surgery practices. Chambers was an invited signatory to the campaign's launch [5.2, 5.3] and an excerpt from her work was chosen to be *Feminista*'s first 'thinkpiece' on its website [5.4, 5.5]. This was a result of the fact that one of the *Feminista* organisers had read her work some time before: 'I read some of your work as a masters student a few years ago and now coming to run this campaign I think that you would bring brilliant insight to the discussion with regard to notions of choice and women's autonomy in the context of cosmetic surgery as a harmful practice and gender inequalities in the UK' (Policy and Campaigns Manager, *UK Feminista*) [5.6].

On the basis of the *Feminista* piece, Chambers was invited onto BBC Woman's Hour [5.7]: 'Having recently read some extracts from your book *Sex, Culture, and Justice* on the *UK Feminista* website, you sprung to mind as someone who could give us a really great insight into how ideas of social norms are bringing more and more women to have invasive surgery' (Producer, BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour) [5.8]. The context was a debate on cosmetic surgery and the concept of what is 'normal'. *Woman's Hour* has an audience of 3 million broadcast listeners, plus listen again and podcast audiences and social media shares. Dr Chambers's item was also discussed in the phone-in the next day.

2. Keynote speech at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) event on *Gender Justice, Society and the State*

In December 2011 Chambers was invited to be a Keynote Speaker at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) event on *Gender Justice, Society and the State* [5.9, 5.10]. Audience members included MPs, ministers, members of think tanks, pressure groups and journalists. About 100 people attended this event.

This invitation was made on the basis of *Sex, Culture and Justice*. A visiting fellow at the IPPR, wrote to her as follows: 'My IPPR colleague, Tess Lanning, and I were wondering whether you would be able to give a 10 minute opening talk on the second of the workshop's panels based on your research for *Sex, Culture, and Justice* and other works' [5.11].

Chambers received positive feedback on her contribution to the discussion. The General Secretary of the Fabian Society (one of the participants in the IPPR event) wrote that 'Clare Chambers's presentation combined the rigour of academic political theory with a focus on real-world dilemmas relevant to her audience of political practitioners. In highlighting the paradox of freely-chosen and enjoyed activities which are also harmful, Chambers brought a new dimension to the Fabian Society's on-going thinking on the limits of choice and markets in social democratic politics. The questions of how to approach choice is critical to the Society's efforts to promote new thinking within the British left that moves beyond the conceptual and policy toolkit of new Labour's version of liberalism. The presentation had immediate practical value in helping the Fabian Women's Network define its 2012/13 work programme, including a recent event on the sexualisation of women in popular culture which received wide coverage in the national media' [5.12].

Chambers's IPPR talk (and her underlying research) was also discussed by Rahila Gupta, in a post on the Open Democracy blog on 4th January 2012 [5.13]. Chambers herself discussed these views on a Philosophy Bites podcast, 'Justifying Intervention' [5.14].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] Review of *Sex, Culture and Justice* by Faith Armitage *Feminist Review* (2009) 91, 200–203.

[5.2] Open letter about cosmetic surgery, to which Chambers was a signatory:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/mar/14/cosmetic-surgery-advertising-ban>

- [5.3] Email from Person 1 (Policy and Campaigns Manager, UK Feminista) (5-Mar-12).
- [5.4] Edited excerpt from *Sex, Culture, and Justice* published by UK Feminista as their first 'Thinkpiece' on "Cosmetic Surgery, Culture, and Choice". See http://ukfeminista.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Cosmetic_surgery_culture_and_choice.pdf
- [5.5] Email from Person 1 (29-Feb-12).
- [5.6] Email from Person 1 (20-Feb-12).
- [5.7] BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* (on 31st July 2012) (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00wr7q8>).
- [5.8] Emails from Person 2 (Producer, BBC) (25-July-12).
- [5.9] IPPR event: <http://m.ippr.org/events/54/8464/gender-justice-society-and-the-state>.
- [5.10] IPPR talk cited in *Fabiana*, the magazine of the Fabian Society Women's Network, issue 2 p. 7 (Winter 2012). Online version available at: <http://www.fabianwomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/FABIANAWINTER2012.pdf>
(Note that Chambers is mistakenly located at the Centre for Gender Studies, rather than the Faculty of Philosophy)
- [5.11] Emails from Person 3 (Professor of Political Theory, University of Oxford) (20-Oct-2011).
- [5.12] Email from Person 4 (General Secretary, Fabian Society) (23-Feb-13).
- [5.13] Discussion of Chambers on the 'open democracy' blog: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/rahila-gupta/has-neoliberalism-knocked-feminism-sideways>
- [5.14] Philosophy Bites podcast on "Justifying Intervention", interviewed by Nigel Warburton and David Edmonds (2011). Also in special series "Multiculturalism Bites", available on <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/multiculturalism-bites?track=5a53fc8505>