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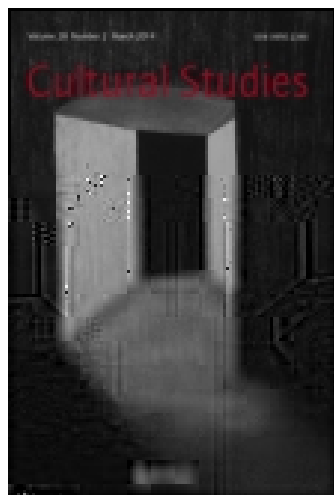
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Cultural Studies



The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism



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Catherine Rottenberg

THE RISE OF NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM

In this paper, I argue that we are currently witnessing the emergence of n

shelves and instantly became a New York Times best-seller.² These self-declared

feminist (and not simply a female) subject. Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic

identities subsequently emerge. One of the hallmarks of our neoliberal a Brown proposes, is precisely the casting of every human endeavor and ac in entrepreneurial terms (p. 40).

while displacing and replacing their content, this recuperated feminism forges a feminist subject who is not only individualized but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation. Indeed, creative individual solutions are presented as feminist and progressive, while calibrating a felicitous work-family balance becomes her main task. Inequality between men and women is thus paradoxically acknowledged only to be disavowed, and the question of social justice is recast in personal, individualized terms.

The liberal husk of Lean In

Lean In is a site in which we can very clearly discern the processes by and through which liberal feminism is disarticulated, and the neoliberal feminist subject is born. The book is a mixture of personal anecdotes, motivational language, and journalism of which is larded with hard facts and statistics. It is a quick read, and Sandberg is careful to introduce pithy and catchy phrases as a way of attracting as wide an audience as possible. Moreover, she self-consciously details how she would like her text to be read:

Sandberg mentions by name countries that have been represented endlessly in Western media as torn apart by Islamic extremism. This, as Ann Norton has persuasively argued, is part of an Islamophobic discourse that endlessly depicts the Muslim world as particularly hostile to women, which then serves to shore up US national sentiment and nation building (p. 67).

But Lean ~~Id~~ does not ultimately use this anti-Islam trope to ~~garden~~ deflect feminists and other potential critics away from the continuing oppression of women in the West (Norton 2013 p. 67). Instead, Sandberg turns a critical eye on the USA itself, declaring that despite tremendous progress there is still work to be done, particularly when it comes to women occupying positions of power and leadership. In government, in industry, and in corporations, she t

are no longer obstructed by discriminatory laws and exclusionary institutions, what are the causes of (white middle class) women's inequality in the USA? If Betty Friedan's objective was to uncover the powerful cultural norms and pressures of femininity, namely, the feminine mystique, which kept white middle-class women in the domestic sphere in the post- Second World War era, Naomi Wolf's aim was to expose the way in which contemporary ideals of female beauty endlessly produced in the mass media helped to create an atmosphere of self-loathing and psychological warfare among a new generation of middle-class women who had grown up in the wake of the women's movement and who were entering the public sphere in record numbers. Sandberg, too, is addressing a similar question (and a similarly privileged white [upper] middle-class audience), and like Friedan, she is ultimately interested in encouraging women to pursue professional careers in contrast to both Friedan and Wolf. Sean's focus is decidedly not on confronting or changing social pressures, but rather on what women can change themselves, 'internal obstacles' (Sandberg 2013 p. 10). The shift in emphasis: from an attempt to alter social pressures towards interiorized affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring is precisely the node through which liberal feminism is rendered hollow and transmuted into a mode of neoliberal governmentality.

The demand for self-realization and self-transformation is, of course, nothing new in the USA. It was as Christine Stansell has so meticulously documented, a central part of the women's movement in the 1970s and has a much longer history in US culture: from the American Dream discourse and the Horatio Alger myth, through New Age cults and contemporary meditation and yoga trends. Indeed, Sandberg draws on a wide variety of recognizable American discourses, such as American exceptionalism, as well as the highly profitable how-to-succeed literary genre, some of which she explicitly acknowledges and some of which serve as the implicit palimpsest for her brand of feminism. Anne Applebaum (2013) describes Sean's as the first truly successful, best-selling how to succeed in business motivational book to be explicitly designed and marketed to women. Yet, despite the hype surrounding its publication, there is nothing particularly new about 'Sandberg'. Applebaum claims, except the fact of its female authorship and its target audience.

While Applebaum's critique is timely in that it highlights the specifically entrepreneurial aspect of Sean, in this kind of criticism ultimately fails to underscore what is indeed new in feminist manifestos like Sandberg's. Understood as a significant intervention in the feminist discussion, which I believe we must, then the book can be read as marking (and marketing) a change in current articulations of mainstream liberal feminism and as participating in the production of a new feminist subject. This subject willingly and forcibly acknowledges continued gender inequality but, as I show, her feminism is so individuated that it has been completely unmoored from any

notion of social equality and consequently cannot offer any sustained analysis of the structures of male dominance, power, or privilege. In this emerging feminism, then, there is a liberal wrapping, while the core, its mode of operation is neoliberal through and through.

Tipping the scales: metamorphosing liberalism into neoliberalism

True to its title,

treatment, equal institutional access, and women's integration into the public sphere are expediently elided, while climbing the power hierarchy ultimately becomes the feminist objective. Through the book's shifting discursive registers, Lean In

ramifications of male dominance and sexism in everyday lives, these lean in groups are geared to encourage women to play the corporate game more deftly (McRobbie 2013 p. 24). The very conception of encouraging women in these groups to lean into their individual careers is antithetical to working together towards a common goal. What is reinforced and (re)produced in these groups, then, is precisely the entrepreneurial subject who is encouraged to take her own personal initiative in order to improve her career prospects particularly in the corporate world.

The last chapter of *Lean In* is entitled 'Working Together Toward Equality'. The trajectory of this final chapter parallels the process of liberal feminist disarticulation in the book more generally: initially summoning the hallowed and today uncontroversial liberal political principle of formal equality, Sandberg very quickly moves on to personal anecdotes as well as expressions of concern about the increasing numbers of high potential women *offering* the career track, particularly when they have children, concluding with her now familiar solution to the stalled revolution: more women in positions of power. There is no dwelling on the significance of equality beyond the 'trickle down' statement that it will be achieved only when more *rise* women to the top of every government and every industry (Sandberg 2013 p. 159). Indeed, with lightning speed, the text moves from its mention of equality to honing in on encouraging women to seek challenges and lead (Sandberg 2013). The chapter then ends with a passionate exhortation to individual women to strive to reach the highest echelons of their respective organizations. This is a strange concept of working together *indeed* from a liberal feminist perspective since each woman is urged to set her own goals within her own career path and then reach for them with gusto. Working together thus is not working separately for a similar but separate goal, perhaps.

In these final pages Sandberg ironically converts the *working* of together into its polar opposite. Moreover, she confidently assumes that having more women in the leadership position will automatically ensure fairer treatment for all women, because shared experience leads to empathy (p. 159). This is exactly the kind of top down approach for which many feminists have already harshly criticized Sandberg. *Lean In* not only is the address directed to a tiny number of women, but her whole agenda operates to inculcate the norms of the market, which divide rather than unify even these extremely privileged women. While this is a key point, my focus here, however, is less on the kinds of exclusions upon which this kind of feminism is predicated, again, many critics have rightly been quick to underscore more on the hows and whys of its emergence, even though these aspects are, of course, inextricably implicated in one another.

No longer concerned with classic liberal feminist notions such as moral personhood or each person being an end in and of herself which have a long history in the West and in the USA (Sachs-Albee 2011), this new

feminism inaugurates a subject who is being called upon for [her] own needs and service [her] own ambition (Bion 2006 p. 694). She may conceive of herself as an end, but everyone else becomes mere means. The feminist subject is amoral

most likely) be found by following a particular path: only certain choices can bring women in closer proximity to well-being and true feminist consciousness.

Furthermore, the notion of pursuing happiness is identified with an economic model of sorts in which each woman is asked to calculate the right balance between work and family. The promise of emancipation and happiness in this feminism holds out hinges not only on a desire to cultivate a professional life on having a spouse and children, but also on the ability to calibrate a perfect equilibrium between the private and the public sphere. Happiness, therefore, plays a crucial role in this new feminism: it becomes the objective of a particular calculus, functions as a normalizing matrix, and serves to deflect attention away from the process by which neoliberal feminism is rapidly displacing mainstream liberal feminism.

As I have argued elsewhere, advocating a happy work-family balance is one of the ways in which the emergent feminism disavows the gendered contradictions constitutive of the public-private divide within the liberal imagination, while simultaneously providing fertile ground for the expansion of neoliberal rationality. The widespread mobilization and acceptance of terms, such as happy work-family balance operate, in other words, to shore up the gendered presuppositions that make the liberal production of space possible, namely, the public-private distinction while allowing for the continued evisceration of the foundations upon which that spatiality has been built. The notion of pursuing happiness consequently not only orients us away from countering the rise of neoliberal feminism, but also from attempting to imagine spatiality and social relations in new ways.

To make good on the new millennial feminist promise, then, it seems that 'progressive' ambitious women are compelled and encouraged to pursue happiness through constructing a self-tailored family balance. The turn to a notion of a happy balance, moreover, helps to further convert mainstream liberal feminism from a discourse even if tangentially concerned with social pressures to one that produces a subject who is constantly turned inward, monitoring herself. After all, the goal of crafting and maintaining a felicitous equilibrium—which might entail, for instance, making up lost time with children after investing too many hours at work, or finding creative solutions to unexpected conflicts, such as planning an important conference call after children's bedtime is elusive, since well-being is famously difficult to gauge, but, as a consequence of affect's elusiveness, requires constant calculation and optimizing of personal resources. Thus, the quest for not just a satisfactory equilibrium but a satisfying equilibrium further inscribes an entrepreneurial subject and a market rationality in order to be successful and content, even for a period of time, efficiency, innovation and a cost-benefit calculus paramount.

This new feminist norm appears to have already taken hold in the U.S. cultural imagination. In a July 12, 2013 article *New York Times*

example, Kate Taylor describes a rising phenomenon among middle-class undergraduate women in elite universities. Holding up women like Sandberg, Slaughter and Marissa Mayer as their role models, Taylor describes how potentially high-achieving young women are no longer interested in investing in relationships during their college years when they feel they need to be concerned with building their professional resumés. The reasons these university students give for their decision to hook up buddies rather than boyfriends is the 'low risk and low investment of hooking up'. Their orientation is one thoroughly informed by a cost-benefit metrics. Importantly, however, these women do not reject the family part of the equation. Rather, the women interviewed by Taylor declared that they would likely defer marriage until their late 20s or early 30s when they felt they had already established themselves professionally. This careful calculation in the present, in other words, will make it possible to craft that elusive work-family balance later on.

Sandberg's 'how-to-reinvigorate-feminism' programme is not only a New York Times best-seller, but her TED talks have attracted millions of viewers. Her message, though, have indicated is not unique. Indeed, the buzz surrounding Sandberg's book occurred in the wake of the media hype

precisely to facilitate each woman's ability to continue cultivating their professional ambitions while fulfilling their desire for a satisfying family life. Slaughter does gesture more towards the need for institutional change than Sandberg, yet change is ultimately understood as the consequence of empowered women taking personal initiative and demanding things like flexible time. Moreover, Slaughter calls upon the same elite cadre of highly successful women— thus initiating the identical top-down, elitist and exclusionary approach. The very turn to a language of affect, namely, the importance of the pursuit of personal happiness (through balance), unravels any social critique of inequality by placing the responsibility of well-being, as well as the burden of unhappiness, once again, on the shoulders of individual women.

Even in the heyday of the feminist movement in the early 1970s, the call for self-transformation or self-empowerment was accompanied by some form of critique of systemic male domination and/or structural discrimination. Today, by contrast, the emergent feminism is contracting, shining its spotlight, as well as the onus of responsibility on each female subject while turning that subject even more intensively inward. As a result, neoliberal feminism is surprisingly purging itself of all elements that would orient it outwards, towards the public good. Yet, simply claiming that this discourse is not really feminist or constitutes some sort of backlash against feminism is too easy and, I believe, misguided, both because such a claim assumes that there is a true definition of feminism (and we have or know it), and because it misses the opportunity to understand the kind of cultural work the emergence of neoliberal feminism, which tracts like a clean land. 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' reflect and (re)produce what is currently doing.

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer a set of speculations about what we are witnessing the emergence of a neoliberal feminism. To begin with, it is important to ask the question of why neoliberalism acknowledges and revivifies discourse about continued gender inequality at all. This in and of itself seems somewhat paradoxical, given neoliberalism's regard and steady eros of

progressive superiority (2007 Eng 2010), neoliberal feminism may be the latest discursive modality to (re)produce the USA as the bastion of progressive liberal democracy. Rather than deflecting internal criticism by shining the spotlight of oppressive practices onto other countries while overtly showcasing its progressive superiority, this discursive formation actually generates its own internal critique of the USA. Yet it simultaneously inscribes and circumscribes the permissible parameters of that very same internal critique. In this way, the USA can continue touting its much more enlightened because self-critical and always-improving gender relations, while continuing to modelize equality as the benchmark for civilization. This, too, helps to neutralize criticism from other strands of feminism, as well as from other countries about continuing gender inequality inside the USA, helps to forget, yet again, racial inequality focusing on a post-racial and individualized feminist subject, and serves to justify continued imperialist intervention in countries that do not respect the liberal principle of gender equality. On the other hand, the turn 'inward' – both to the USA and into interiorized affective spaces – helps to further entrench neoliberalism by responsabilizing women and by producing individuated feminist subjects who have transmuted liberation into self-care melded neoliberal rationality with an emancipatory project.

It seems clear that there is fertile ground for the emergent neoliberal feminism. The fact that Sandberg and Slaughter have so quickly become highly visible representatives of mainstream feminism seems to point to a much broader truth about contemporary US society. Rather than end on a defeatist note, however, I suggest that we need to return to the insights of Stuart Hall (2001) and Wendy Larner (2000), who have been careful to underscore that neoliberalism is not a seamless monolithic apparatus. Despite the powerful influence of neoliberal rationality, it is also constantly generating internal contradictions and incoherencies. Consequently, if there are still to be alternative visions to the neoliberalization of everything, then it may be more urgent than ever to change our own critical orientation. Rather than simply rejecting or denouncing these neoliberal feminist manifestos, perhaps we may do better by identifying and working within the potential fault lines of their logic and conceits. To begin with, then, we could highlight the gaping irreconcilability of the notion of gender equality with the turn towards happiness and intricate processes of individuation. After all, the turn to positive affect and to intensified individuation in neoliberal feminism is exactly the turn away from the questions of social justice, and the common good that were, at the very least, a source of tension within classic liberal feminism. Indeed, glaring inconsistencies emerge as these manifestos move from a discourse of equality and social justice to a discourse of positive affect. What Women Still Can Have It All, for example, Slaughter acknowledges that the crisis she explores is one that is most relevant to high potential upwardly mobile women, and yet she calls for a national happiness project. If the feminism that Slaughter advocates

does not address and cannot take into account the reality of the vast majority of US women, then a national project it clearly is not. Thus, while underscoring these contradictions and incoherencies, we would also do well to point out that the personal well-being of women like Sandberg and Slaughter, who likely constitute less than 0.1% of the general population, is increasingly coming at the expense of the 99.9%, namely, the overwhelming majority of poor, working class, and middle-class women in the USA.

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Notes

- 1 Wikipedia Entry on Anne-Marie Slaughter. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne-Marie_Slaughter [Accessed July 30, 2013]
- 2 See, for example, Sudduth (2013)
- 3 Professor Slaughter was the first woman to hold the position of Director of Policy Planning in the State Department.
- 4 Kantor (2013).
- 5 See, Kantor (2013), Huffer (2013), and Eisenstein (2013).
- 6 See, for example, Rottenberg (2013) and Eisenstein (2013).
- 7 In many ways Fraser's current argument can be seen to recapitulate her earlier indictment of the decoupling of cultural politics from social politics (1997 p. 2). In *Justice Interruptus*, she describes the increasing tendency of social movements and feminists to privilege recognition over redistribution. Her

McRobbie whose concern is primarily with what she terms the new norm of 'maternal-familialism' that aims to reify the nuclear family structure as an enterprise, thus legitimizing the extinction of public services is on the way neoliberal feminism is not only eviscerating liberal feminism but helping to produce a particular kind of femininity opposed to a female subject.

- 9 It is perhaps important to remember that *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, is not only considered part of the liberal feminist tradition but is often credited with sparking the beginning of second-wave feminism. *Feminist Beauty Myth*, by contrast, was first published in 1990, at a time when the term postfeminism was gaining currency. *Walt* is often considered part of so-called third-wave feminism as well as a critique of liberal feminist assumptions. What is interesting, however, is that despite the many differences between these feminist manifestos, they all return to a similar liberal paradox.

10 See, for example, Rottenberg and Huffer.

11 I have also argued that this new femininity is what I term the Balanced Woman

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