

Book Review: Catherine Rottenberg's Neoliberal Feminism

Wednesday 9 January 2019, by [BAILES Jon](#), [ROTTENBERG Catherine](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2019).

In recent years, it has become increasingly uncontroversial in parts of mainstream discourse for women to identify as feminist. In much of popular culture, feminism is no longer depicted as a marginal, radical ideology and has instead become a desirable ethical stance promoted even by the elite. But what is actually meant by 'feminism' in these instances, and how does it relate to a project to improve the rights and freedoms of women in general?

In her 2018 book, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* [1], Catherine Rottenberg explains how the popular concept of feminism that has emerged actually tends towards supporting the status quo and the dominant rationality of competitive individualism. In the following interview I discuss with her the ideas and issues she raises in the book.

Jon Bailes: What are the core characteristics of 'neoliberal feminism'?

Catherine Rottenberg: In a nutshell, I understand neoliberal feminism as a particular variant of feminism that has emerged and become dominant on the Anglo-American cultural landscape in the past decade.

This feminism is a hyper-individualising feminism, which exhorts individual women to organise their life in order to achieve 'a happy work-family balance.' It also incites women to perceive themselves as human capital, encouraging them to invest in themselves and to be empowered and 'confident.' Ultimately, it produces a new feminist subject who is incessantly pressed to take on full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care.

This feminism can and does acknowledge the gendered wage gap and sexual harassment as signs of continued inequality, which, I suggest, distinguishes it from what Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill call postfeminism or a postfeminist sensibility. Yet, the solutions it posits to such inequalities are also individualised – such as encouraging individual women to speak out against sexual harassment and abuse – ultimately eliding the structural undergirding of these phenomena. Neoliberal feminism is thus a form of feminism that not only disavows the socio-economic and cultural structures shaping our lives, but one that has abandoned key feminist terms such as liberation and social justice.

Why is it important to understand neoliberal feminism as a form of feminism, rather than merely a co-optation or colonisation of feminism by neoliberalism?

CR: While some scholars have insisted that neoliberal feminism should not be considered feminist in any way, I would argue that dismissing neoliberal feminism as 'faux feminism' or as an inauthentic feminism is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it assumes that we know or hold the 'truth' of feminism and that the category 'feminism' can be demarcated once and for all. I, for one, do not want to police the boundaries of feminism. I think that this is politically misguided.

I also think it important to highlight that when we insist on securing clear boundaries for feminism, this often entails the (re)grounding of feminism on the liberal conception of the rights-bearing autonomous subject. It also entails a refusal to keep the term feminism open to future democratic contestations. As women of colour and poststructuralist feminists have already taught us, any attempt to define feminism definitively results in violent exclusions.

Another way of saying this might be that my research is not only an attempt to understand the kind of cultural work neoliberal feminism carries out but also strives to challenge it politically. Indeed, simply dismissing neoliberal feminism underestimates the affective power of neoliberal feminism – it is, after all, a ‘happy’ personalised feminism – and this affective power, as my work tries to show, is a crucial mode through which the new feminist and neoliberal subject is being cultivated.

In the book, you explain that this neoliberal concept of feminism has become popular since around 2012, effectively replacing the idea of ‘post-feminism’. What do you think accounts for this mainstream resurgence and reaffirmation of feminism? Does it relate to the economic crisis of neoliberalism, or to the right-wing discourses that have emerged in its wake?

CR: My thinking about the ‘how and whys’ of the rise of neoliberal feminism has shifted over the years.

When I started writing on what I would later call neoliberal feminism in 2012, we were still in the Obama era, and thus we had gotten used to what Nancy Fraser has somewhat provocatively termed ‘progressive neoliberalism.’ I began by arguing that the emergent variant of feminism, with its happy work-family balance ideal, helped to promulgate assumptions about liberal progress, shoring up the notion that the United States was still informed by the liberal principles of equality. This shoring up was occurring precisely as neoliberalism was colonizing more and more domains of our lives. So initially I suggested that while feminism was yet another domain that neoliberalism was colonizing, neoliberal feminism was also serving a particular cultural purpose: namely, hollowing out the potential of mainstream liberal feminism to underscore the constitutive contradictions of liberal democracy, and, in this way, further entrenching neoliberalism.

But then Trump was elected, and we began to see a new permutation of neoliberalism, one shorn of any liberal veneer. Neoliberal feminism was, however, still thriving.

Yet even before the rise of Trumpism I began to realize that neoliberal feminism was carrying out something well beyond shoring up assumptions about the US as a beacon of liberalism. Indeed, it was in the wake of the media hype around egg-freezing and the proliferation of high-profile and celebrity women who were suddenly (or so it seemed) clamouring to identify as feminists, that I began to rethink my claim.

Ultimately, over the years I have come to the conclusion that neoliberalism actually ‘needs’ feminism to resolve one of its internal tensions in relation to gender. Drawing on political theorists Wendy Brown and Michel Feher, I understand neoliberalism not merely as an economic system but as a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as entrepreneurial and capital enhancing generic (meaning nongendered) agents. Neoliberal rationality thus extends a specific formulation of economic values, practices and metrics to every dimension of human life, recasting and transforming human subjects into generic human capital.

On the one hand, then, as an economic order, neoliberalism relies on reproduction and care work in order to reproduce and maintain human capital. Yet, on the other hand, as a political rationality –

and in stark contrast to liberalism – neoliberalism has no lexicon that can recognize let alone value reproduction and care work due to its focus on generic human capital. Everything is reduced to a market metrics – even our political imagination.

The argument my book develops, then, is that neoliberal feminism operates as a kind of pushback to the total conversion of educated and upwardly mobile women into generic rather than gendered human capital. By maintaining reproduction as part of middle-class or so-called aspirational women's normative trajectory and positing balance as its normative frame and ultimate ideal, neoliberal feminism helps to both maintain a discourse of reproduction and care-work while ensuring that all responsibility for these forms of labour – but not necessarily the labour itself, since it is frequently outsourced to other less privileged women – falls squarely on the shoulders of aspirational women. In this way it solves its own constitutive tension – the quandary of reproduction and care-work – at least temporarily.

Indeed, if reproduction and balance were not retained as neoliberal feminism's equation then the transformation of aspirational women into generic human capital would be more or less 'complete' and neoliberal feminist discourse would disappear.

I do not, however, want to suggest that there is one cause or that there is any necessity or teleology in or to the development of neoliberal feminism. And while I argue that that the convergence between neoliberalism and feminism does serve political objectives, the convergence is conjunctural and historically contingent.

How does neoliberal feminism adapt or change the vocabulary associated with other kinds of feminisms? For example, does it still involve notions of equality, freedom, justice and rights, and if so how does it rework these around its emphasis on the individual and personal evaluation?

CR: I'll answer this question by saying a little bit more about the genesis of my book, which I alluded to earlier. As I mentioned, this project began in 2012 when I was on sabbatical in the US. This was precisely the year in which two feminist manifestos were published to much media fanfare: Anne-Marie Slaughter's 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' in the Atlantic – which has since become the most read article in the history of the magazine – and Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In – which instantly became a New York Times bestseller. Thus, all of a sudden, or so it seemed, powerful and high-profile women were publicly identifying as feminists, something that we just hadn't seen in the past. It was at that point that I began to read these two manifestos very carefully.

I am trained as a literary critic, so for me reading Slaughter and later Sandberg was an exercise in close textual analysis. At the time, I was struck by the circulation of what I came to see as a new feminist vocabulary, where happiness, work-family balance, and 'lean in' were replacing key terms traditionally inseparable from public feminist discussions and debates, namely, autonomy, rights, and liberation.

Moreover, in the wake of Slaughter and Sandberg's publications, more and more high power and celebrity women were coming out as feminists. This was as fascinating as it was bizarre. We simply had not seen feminism taken up as mainstream and popular in this way before. So I began to extend my analysis to a range of popular and mainstream venues: from New York Times articles through TV series like The Good Wife to mommy blogs (like Ivy-League Insecurities and a Design So Vast). And what I saw is that this notion of a work-family balance was being bandied about everywhere.

What I realised was that balance was not only being incorporated into the social imagination as a cultural good but had helped to engender a new model of emancipated womanhood: a professional

woman able to balance a successful career with a satisfying family life. A 'happy work-family balance,' in other words, has been (re)presented as a progressive and feminist ideal.

So, again, this strand of feminism exhorts women to perceive themselves as human capital, inciting them to be confident and lean in. It has a lot to say about cultivating a happy equilibrium but has very little to say about equal rights, and even less to say about liberation or social justice. As I also mentioned earlier, while this feminism does acknowledge the gendered wage gap and sexual harassment as signs of continued gender inequality, that is as far as it goes. The solutions to these inequalities are either articulated through a market metrics, namely, through the business case for gender inclusion (namely, it is better for the bottom line to have more women in business) or are completely individualised – namely, empowering individual women to speak out against sexual harassment and abuse.

As you say, the concept of 'balance' between work and family is at the core of neoliberal feminism, and features heavily in the writings of (upper) middle-class professionals such as Anne-Marie Slaughter, Sheryl Sandberg and Ivanka Trump. How does this ideal of balance shape aspirations and relate to neoliberal rationality?

CR: The notion of a happy work-family promulgates the expectation that each individual woman is responsible for calculating the right balance between work and family. 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 the children's bedtime – is elusive, since well-being is famously difficult to gauge.

Yet, precisely because affect is notoriously elusive, it requires constant vigilance, investment, calculation and optimising personal resources. Thus, the quest for a satisfying equilibrium further inscribes a market rationality – since in order to be successful and content, even for a period of time, efficiency, innovation, and a cost-benefit calculus are paramount. And, of course, such a quest requires constant self-surveillance and evaluation. Neoliberal feminism facilitates the process where the self becomes a kind of 'neoliberal spreadsheet' (to use Angela McRobbie's brilliant phrase), where one calculates one's assets, one's losses, and what is more or less valuable in order to decide where more investment is necessary in order to maintain that elusive balance.

As a new norm of emancipated and successful womanhood, a 'happy work-family balance' becomes a normalising matrix, and a form of governmentality, which interpellates so-called aspirational women, and helps shape and direct women's aspirations, desires, and behaviour. In my work, I show just how pervasive and desirable this idea of balance has become for middle-class women. In fact, all one has to do is to read Michelle Obama's new memoir, *Becoming!* Balance is central to her idea of the good life and what progressive womanhood should look like. And as Joan Scott has recently written, idealised norms still matter, not only in the expectations set for individual subjects but because they shape the terms for law, politics and social policy.

The other point here is how these aspirations effectively identify 'happiness' as a kind of demand placed on individuals that can only be fulfilled through hard work and psychological effort. There seems to be a double form of self-discipline required, in effect, in which the neoliberal feminist not only internalises her personal responsibility for maintaining a particular balance, but also for making herself enjoy it. Is this a crucial part of the neoliberal feminist discourse?

CR: Yes, happiness plays a crucial role in this new feminism. I would argue that happiness becomes a technology of the self. Here I have been profoundly influenced by the work of feminist scholar

Lynne Segal and cultural critic Sara Ahmed. Ahmed has taught us how happiness functions as a promise that directs subjects toward certain objects, goals, and behaviours that are considered necessary ingredients for the good life. Ahmed argues that the promise of happiness orients subjects in the 'right way,' namely, in the direction of the social ideals that are thought to bring happiness through a subject's proximity to them. The promise operates as a technology of cultivation and control through affective routes: Who, after all, does not want to be happy? And, I would add – only half facetiously – who doesn't want to be balanced, to live a balanced life, especially given the current mental health crisis? These notions seem and are presented as benign and desirable. But they do orient us in particular directions and help shape our desires and aspirations.

Neoliberal feminism thus reinforces the idea that happiness can only be found by following a particular path. 'Progressive' ambitious women are therefore encouraged to pursue happiness through constructing a self-tailored work-family balance. There is certainly a denial of bad or negative feelings at play here as well.

Christina Scharff's work on positive affect has also been very useful for me here. Scharff demonstrates how neoliberal governmentality has helped to produce subjects who not only relate to themselves as businesses or enterprises but who must also constantly foster a positive attitude in order to maintain their sense of well-being in a highly and increasingly competitive world. So negativity is disavowed and bad feelings signify a loss of competitiveness or even failure.

A former student of mine, Shir Shimoni, is now doing amazing work on how this discourse of happiness is currently interpellating aging subjects (the 'third age,' more specifically) and how temporality figures differently in the neoliberal address to older individuals. Finally, I might add that the task of pursuing happiness through balance orients us away not only from countering the rise of neoliberal feminism but also from attempting to imagine social relations in new ways. This seems to me absolutely key.

You also highlight in the book how the focus in neoliberal feminism on a minority of 'aspirational' professionals effectively disregards the majority of women along lines of class and race, and how these professionals rely on low-wage, often immigrant, care workers (nannies, cleaners, and so on) to achieve their work-family balance. What are the economic and political repercussions of neoliberal feminism, in terms of class and race division? Is it a case of not merely maintaining and tacitly legitimating existing divisions, but actively reinforcing them?

CR: First let me say that neoliberal feminism is an unabashedly exclusionary variant of feminism, encompassing as it does only so-called aspirational women in its interpellative address. So, yes, it does actively reinforce already existing hierarchies. By directing its address to so-called aspirational women – who already have a certain amount of social, cultural and economic capital, it helps to reify white and class privilege and heteronormativity, while lending itself to neo-conservative and xenophobic agendas. This discourse, of course, presents society as consisting of a relatively level playing field, which as Jo Littler has so brilliantly demonstrated, is one of the most effective modes in which neoliberal meritocracy operates.

Moreover, if neoliberal feminism's ideal is a happy work-family balance, with family translating into having children, then you can see how it reinscribes a heteronormative and nuclear family structure. It is about cultivating a professional career while at the same time encouraging women to have children. So this new variant of feminism can accommodate women of colour or queer or trans women but only those who emulate the happy work-family balance ideal. Note, again, how affect works here.

In my research, I also hypothesise that as reproductive technology develops, a certain strata of women – the Sandbergs but also the Slaughters of the world – will likely be able to outsource reproduction and care work more and more to other women, thus ensuring the re-entrenchment of the so-called aspirational subject as generic human capital, while producing a whole other class of women who are conceived as not fully ‘responsibilized’ and thus exploitable and disposable.

Given the reality that, most often, women of colour, and poor and immigrant women serve as the unacknowledged care-workers who enable professional women to strive towards ‘balance’ in their lives, neoliberal feminism also helps to (re)produce and legitimise the exploitation of these ‘other’ female subjects while simultaneously disarticulating the very vocabulary with which to address these vast inequalities.

It is in this way that neoliberal feminism not only forsakes the majority of women by splitting female subjecthood into worthy and disposable women, but it also facilitates the creation of intensified forms of racialised and class-stratified gender exploitation, which increasingly constitutes the invisible infrastructure of our neoliberal order.

The emphasis on balance also reinforces an idea of ‘having it all’, usually defined in terms of career and family. As you say in your analyses of Ivanka Trump’s and Megyn Kelly’s books, it also involves a strong ‘rhetoric of doing better, being better, and settling for more’, or ‘working on every aspect of one’s life in order to create one’s best self.’ Does this idea of self-improvement then also function as an ideological judgement on all women who don’t have lucrative careers and conventional families, in the sense that it demonises them for failing to realise their best selves?

CR: Yes, I think it does. Since neoliberal feminism both disavows the structural injustices that shape our lives while simultaneously individualising and responsibilizing women, it seems clear that women who fail to live up to the new ideal of emancipated and successful womanhood are deemed failures. They are deemed insufficiently responsibilized and thus they have only themselves to blame. This then places the burden of unhappiness on the shoulders of individual women. But, of course, this is also an old US refrain, so neoliberal feminism must also be understood as converging with and rearticulating other discourses and histories in the US.

Though I am not sure if neoliberal feminism needs demons per se; it just needs dispensable and exploitable women to uphold the gendered but increasingly invisibilised infrastructure of reproductive and care work.

It seems that there is an aspect of neoliberal rationality that pressurises individuals, especially women, to excel not only in regards to work and family but in all areas of life (such as health, pleasure, financial independence and social responsibility). In this sense, neoliberal feminism is perhaps just one way of (unconsciously) reconciling the tensions between these pressures. If we look at it this way, what does neoliberal feminism tell us about the impossible and contradictory demands that neoliberalism places on individuals?

I think this demand that we work on all aspect of our lives – which is precisely what Ivanka Trump exhorts women to do in her book *Women Who Work* – actually reveals something a bit different. It is precisely about encouraging women to consider themselves as a form of ‘stock,’ where their normative role is to augment their market value.

In other words, this constant exhortation that women invest in and work on all domains of their lives, helps to (re)produce the conversion of women from ostensible autonomous rights bearing liberal subjects who need to fight discrimination in order to gain access to the marketplace in order to sell

their labour, into subjects who must work tirelessly on themselves in order to produce and cultivate their selves as generic human capital. Every aspect of the self becomes a site of speculation, intense scrutiny and affective investment – a process whose objective is to increase and diversify the self's assets, to facilitate its appreciation, but just as importantly, to prevent its depreciation.

This totalising approach of the self as human capital serves to facilitate the transformation of the self into a business enterprise, while simultaneously helping to further unravel the private-public divide. But this is why neoliberal feminism is crucial, since it ensures that reproduction and care work continue to function as a pushback to neoliberalism's conversion of aspirational women into generic subjects.

I think we see this double movement most clearly in Trump's text. On the one hand, there is a certain intensification of this conversion of women into generic human capital, since even the realm of care is transmogrified into regulated, calculative and carefully planned affective investment. Reproductive and care work is presented in more managerial terms, which gestures to the further saturation of a market metrics into domains that have traditionally upheld the gendered division of labour, such as raising children or even going on a date with one's husband. Yet, the conversion of 'aspirational' women into generic human capital remains incomplete, and not merely because women are the ones deemed responsible for managing the to-do lists. Rather, Trump's normative trajectory still includes reproduction, while her ideal of female success remains a happy work-family balance. Reproduction and care work continue to function as a pushback to neoliberalism's conversion of aspirational women into generic subjects.

In short, I see neoliberal feminism as reconciling a particular tension within neoliberalism. So it is less about impossible demands placed upon women – although it is about that as well – and more about the conversion of everything into specks of capital on the one hand, and the impossible 'remainder' that reproduction and care work continue to (re)present.

Is there any progressive element to neoliberal feminism as you see it? Do aspirations, for example, of a 'top down' revolution based on more women reaching positions of power really involve a social ideal or are they merely cynical or misconceived?

CR: I am not sure that there are progressive elements to neoliberal feminism as such, even if I might argue that some of the effects of this variant of feminism's circulation have led to more oppositional and even militant feminist mobilising. But I will get to this in a minute. And while I am all for having more women in positions of power, the idea that simply having more women on boards or in Congress for example – even if they identify as feminists – will necessarily or automatically make the lives of most women better is totally misguided. This is part and parcel of the neoliberal feminist imaginary, where individual women's success and empowerment are deemed the end game for feminism.

The kinds of issue we face today are structural, systemic and urgent. Increasing women's representation or any other kind of trickle-down solution simply won't cut it – not when we are facing immanent and catastrophic threats to life on Earth as we know it – whether in the form of looming environmental catastrophe or renewed threat of nuclear war.

How does a more radical or progressive feminism reclaim ground from neoliberal feminism? What do events in recent years such as the #MeToo movement or International Women's Day protests show us about resisting neoliberal feminism's concepts of individualism, balance and happiness?

CR: Lately, I have been thinking a lot about this question. One of the things about neoliberal

feminism is that as a hyper-individualising discourse it lends itself to being mainstreamed and popularised. Precisely because neoliberal feminism has gained prominence in the last decade, and precisely because it constantly exhorts individual women to focus on their own personal well-being and aspirations in the form of a happy work-family balance, this variant of feminism can more easily be rendered palatable and desirable, which, in turn, has facilitated its widespread embrace and circulation.

This is key since neoliberal feminism should be understood as having helped to create the cultural conditions enabling the emergence of what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls 'popular feminism' – a feminism that she argues 'tinkers on the surface, encouraging individual girls and women to just 'be' empowered' – thus precipitating feminism's even wider visibility and dissemination across media venues in the Anglo-American world.

So one of the claims I have begun to make is that neoliberal feminism has facilitated feminism's renewed visibility and widespread embrace, most prominently in the form of a popular feminism. This, in turn, has – perhaps paradoxically – helped to pave the way for more militant and mass feminist movements, such as #MeToo. Clearly, much of the infrastructure for the recent oppositional feminist groundswell was already in place. We know that the 'Me Too' campaign initially emerged over a decade ago as part of a grassroots movement spearheaded by the African American activist Tarana Burke, and that it comes on the heels of other mobilisations, such as SlutWalk.

But I want to suggest that in addition to Trump's election and the reappearance of a shameless sexism in the public sphere, which has had its own galvanising effect, movements like #MeToo and the Global Women's Strike were able to gain such widespread traction at this particular moment in history, at least in part, because feminism had already been embraced and rendered desirable by high-power corporate women like Sheryl Sandberg, or celebrities like Emma Watson and Beyoncé – to name just a few.

Taken all together, these various feminist manifestations all suggest that we are experiencing a feminist renaissance of sorts, not all aspects of which are worth celebrating.

I think we are at a crossroads – on all kinds of levels. The urgent question, and one that I don't have an answer to is how can we sustain and broaden this feminist renaissance as counter-hegemonic and thus as a threat to the powers that be, while rejecting neoliberal feminist logic.

P.S.

- State of Nature blog, 9th January 2019:

<http://stateofnatureblog.com/catherine-rottenberg-neoliberal-feminism/?fbclid=IwAR3TFppM6CJxkSWb3dUY00eCkJTcl5fivkvV5RJxTbngJgMFYd3ZswLHv1E>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-rise-of-neoliberal-feminism-9780190901226?q=rottenberg&lang=en&cc=tr>