

Who's a feminist?

Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 239pp., £19.99 hb., 978 0 19090 122 6

It is the best of times and it is the worst of times to declare oneself a feminist today. Presentations of that creature have been shape shifting for decades, though right now she suddenly seems more popular than ever, sometimes appearing as a celebrated media figure: her shiny long hair and designer clothes triggering little fear. Should she appear *en masse* at demonstrations, however, the media will usually retreat. It is true that the re-emergence of the women's liberation movement, half a century ago, always included a multitude of contesting voices. But nowadays they seem more divided than ever. Younger feminist militants can often be seen welcoming trans women, sex workers and supporting the proposed Gender Recognition Act (GRA), making life easier for trans people; while some older feminists perceive these moves as threatening 'women-only' safe spaces and priorities, angrily opposing the GRA. My own brand of Left feminists usually hark back to other forms of radicalism, when we worked (as, indeed, we continue to do) 'in and against' the state for a range of welfare and other resources that would enable all women to participate in social, political and cultural life on an equal footing with men, thereby beginning to undermine, or at least marginalise, the complex system of gender hierarchy itself, entangled as it is with capitalist class and racialised domination.

For many years after the rise of second wave feminism, 'women's libbers' – of any stripe – were mostly ridiculed in the mainstream. 'You're not one of those angry, resentful bra-burners are you?' This was the routine greeting that activists received; often from men and women alike. Ambitious, professional women did not embrace feminism in the days of its combative radicalism. They suspected, usually rightly, that it was more an impediment than an advantage to career success, while many home-based women ('housewives') felt threatened by its critical appraisal of their marginalisation in the wider world. We were, after all, fighting for social transformation on every front, including the meanings attached to 'womanhood' itself. Indeed, many who would later happily adopt the label 'feminist' remained dis-

missive of the heyday of women's liberation, including, for example, the influential columnist and writer, Polly Toynbee, who declared in 'The myth of women's lib', in 2002: 'the "women's movement" of the 60s and 70s never really existed'.

Others who did identify with feminism from its early days of militancy, such as the attentive sociologist Angela McRobbie, later mapped out what she saw as the deliberate 'undoing of feminism' and some of its early successes. In *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), McRobbie suggested that, by the 1990s, feminism was not so much rejected as 'taken into account', while, at the very same time, being disdained as outmoded and unnecessary. Feminism was depicted as unfashionable, irrelevant for the sexy and successful young woman, now living a 'post-feminist' life, where individuals and their choices were all that mattered. A few years later, however, and we can detect the further twist with which I began, as feminism (of a kind) now appears fashionable, even popular – in some ways, really for the very first time. The T-shirt 'THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE' was first designed by the Fawcett Society (the leading British charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights), but was quickly snapped up by fashion designers globally, even appearing in Paris fashion week a few years ago. Feminism was once notoriously 'anti-fashion', disdaining make-up and high heels, refusing to be the 'custom-made women' that male designers wanted us to be. But we know times are changing when feminist slogans appear on global catwalks, worn by film stars as celebrity allure (from Natalie Portman to Rihanna), or briefly flaunted by politicians and corporate executives, including men.

But is this what we *want* a feminist to look like, some may well ask, wondering what has been gained and what lost in all this 'feminist' shape shifting. If so, it is time to turn to Catherine Rottenberg's riveting survey of the recent rise and mutations of new feminist discourses, which largely mirror the dominant neoliberal rationality of competitive individualism, even as they highlight its pres-

asures and contradictions. In *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Rottenberg sees 2012 as a symbolic watershed, following the publication of Anne-Marie Slaughter's 'Why Women Still Can't Have it All', which quickly became the most popular article ever published in *The Atlantic*. It helped generate a global explosion of media discussion addressing the situation of high-achieving women, reflecting the deepening crisis between public and private life. Slaughter explained that she needed to create a better 'work-life balance' as the mother of young children, which is why she resigned from her pre-eminent role as Director of Policy Planning under the Obama administration in Washington to resume her former tenured position at Princeton University, enabling her to spend more time with her growing family. This last decade also saw the spectacular impact of Facebook's chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, soon to become one of the most influential women in the world following her call for more women leaders. Sandberg's chart-topping manifesto, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), sold over 4 million copies over the following five years, and is apparently still selling 10,000 copies monthly. Surveying the landscape on other media highways, the singer Beyoncé performed live for the many millions who watched the MTV video awards in 2014, backed by a stage set left bare apart from giant lettering: FEMINIST. Two years later, the self-declared feminist Hillary Clinton almost became President of the USA, winning the popular vote by nearly three million, despite being beaten when Donald Trump managed to secure more state votes overall through the antiquated system of the electoral college.

Being a feminist could now be paraded as a badge of strength, integrity and self-assurance. But its most distinctive feature, as Rottenberg analyses, is the singular commitment to women's personal empowerment, while its leading voices are those of exceptionally powerful and successful women. 'Neoliberal feminism' is the description she coins to describe this particular mutation out of 'liberal feminism' – a feminist stance that had fought for equal rights for women within existing social structures, but eschewed the need for more radical transformations. Rottenberg's examples of neoliberal feminism are drawn mainly from the USA, but as I write, our current (though soon departing) British Prime Minister, Theresa May – unlike Margaret Thatcher – has similarly declared herself a feminist, and even co-founded Women2Win in 2005 to

help elect more Conservative women to Parliament. The title itself captures the fiercely competitive drive of this new brand of feminism, echoing precisely the neoliberal zeitgeist of winners and losers. The capitalist market has no firmer ally, it would seem, than this form of feminism, one that promises to deliver greater benefits for women when, and only when, they hone their individual skills in search of career success. This is what Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser describe as 'equal opportunity domination' in their recent manifesto, *Feminism for the 99%* (2019).

Rottenberg is aware of all the questions and paradoxes surrounding her analysis. Is feminism itself complicit with the ascent of neoliberalism, the two having emerged at much the same time? Some Left scholars, including Fraser in her much-cited article 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History', have argued that the 'overall trajectory and historical significance' of second wave feminism showed a 'disturbing convergence' with certain neoliberal ideals and demands. Fraser suggests that feminism's stress on the recognition of identity claims over calls for redistributive economic justice, as well as its critique of the patriarchal state, resonated with the hyper-individualism of an intensified financialised or deregulated global capitalism. Others, like McRobbie, reject this, describing feminism as having been appropriated and twisted in neoliberal discourses. Still others, like the British criminologist Lea Sitkin, simply claim that neoliberal feminism is an oxymoron: 'A feminism that is a handmaiden to capitalism isn't feminism at all'. However, Rottenberg's analysis is more complex and nuanced. She notes that since feminism has never had any unitary manifestation, we cannot understand the work of these recent self-proclaimed, media-promoted, elite feminists by simply rejecting their pronouncements as a brand of fake feminism. After all, feminists campaigned for 'Hillary' in vast numbers, and many black schoolgirls are moved and motivated by the inspirational messages of former first Lady, now best-selling author, Michelle Obama. But, as Rottenberg does, we certainly do need to look very closely at the work being done by those aligning themselves with neoliberal rationality in the name of feminism.

What Rottenberg suggests is that the purveyors of neoliberalism have themselves reinvented and reinvigorated this version of feminism in order to overcome



the obstinate contradictions of contemporary capitalism and thus assist its survival. Capitalism now needs feminism, or at least a feminism reduced to fantasies of self-management, to solve its crisis of social reproduction, now that market metrics have been slowly colonising every area of our lives. Drawing in particular upon the feminist political theorist Wendy Brown, Rottenberg emphasises that neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies promoting privatisation of state assets and deregulation to extend the amassing of corporate profits, but also a way of producing subjects who monitor themselves at every turn as a type of 'human capital'. This means always attempting to pursue modes of conduct that might help ensure that they, and their children, become more flexible and hence desirable in present and future labour markets, entailing constant self-regulation and self-improvement that is always expressed and encouraged via the language of choice. This is why that doyenne of corporate neoliberalism, Sheryl Sandberg, declared her pithy text a feminist *manifesto*. *Lean In*, she cheerfully asserts, is dedicated to inspiring Western women, who happily have now won all their basic rights (unlike those in other, usually Islamic states, elsewhere)

to expand their goals and surmount their own 'internal barriers', aiming for the pinnacles of power. Most importantly as well, successful women must ensure they can find that 'happy' work-life balance along the way to enable them to function with maximum efficiency and apparent personal fulfillment in both their public and private lives. Such a stance is further necessitated by market requirements for a shrewd and capable workforce.

These elite women, therefore, not only tower above the rest of us, and help make feminism acceptable, but also crucially suggest that it is indeed *possible* to extend market principles into our home lives, once we start tailoring our performances to enhance our chances of success – whether as managers of home or workplace. As Rottenberg highlights, what is happening here is the spatial collapse of the traditional separation of public and private, with the private sphere now tailored to suit the public domain, as the 'liberated' woman knows she must accept full responsibility for her own well-being in both arenas. The world of care now transmutes into little more than yet another affective investment in the future.

In reality only a fraction of women can maintain any balance at all between these two worlds, when in

recent decades most women, like men, are being forced to work ever longer hours in paid work just to survive, with wages falling or stagnant. Meanwhile, whether in the USA, Britain or increasingly elsewhere, the decline in welfare provisions and the ongoing ruthless reduction in community resources has made any form of domestic caring progressively more stressful. Unless commodified as a corporate concern, markets neither engage with nor value either reproduction or care work, while states have been shedding their responsibilities for maintaining domestic well-being. Hence the need to redefine 'motherhood' in managerial terms, making women, in particular, responsible. Despite fifty years of feminist challenges, motherhood, not parenting, remains emblematic of woman's lot and caring work generally, but must now be rendered potentially compatible with women making all the right 'choices' to enable them to maintain necessary paid employment.

In the name of choice, what we actually find is a drastic curtailment of many women's options. They must either delay or (perhaps unintentionally) forsake motherhood, in search of the perfect conjuncture, or they must fall back on the outsourcing of caring to others, which in practice further entrenches both racialised and class-based gender exploitation. As Rottenberg forecasts, coming into focus on this horizon is not just professional women freezing their eggs until the opportune moment for breeding arises, if it does, but renting a womb from what now emerges as a new class of 'disposable' women. In her succinct, if alarming, summary: 'Neoliberal feminism is not only shorn of all obligations to less privileged women while actually producing new classes of disempowered women, but it is also making alternative futures difficult to envision, since it actively and performatively "forgets" the conditions that naturalise sexual difference and leaves us stunned in the face of a fading lexicon of critique.'

This much is true, and yet, as each day passes, things sometimes look better, and sometimes chillingly worse, for envisaging those alternative futures for which fractious feminists have fought. Impressively, in 2018 over five million women took to the streets of Spain on International Women's Day, supported by several politicians, as part of a 24-hour Global Woman's Strike, calling for an end to sexist oppression, exploitation and violence, while raising awareness of all the unpaid or poorly paid caring work done by women: 'If we stop, the world stops!'

Similar marches, study groups and grass-roots mobilisations, have been occurring around the globe, often led by women, fighting for more egalitarian, sustainable futures against the hurtling harms of the present. Many of them are addressing precisely the contemporary crisis of care, and the diverse exploitations of those women, in particular, made responsible for solving it.

We know from much feminist writing that even middle-class women with children or other dependents are struggling to advance or simply maintain careers and attend to loved ones in need. Meanwhile it can prove the very worst of times for those 'disposable' women whom they call upon for assistance, often part of post-colonial global care chains, perhaps far removed from their own children and support groups, while barely surviving their precarious employment. This is why Rottenberg closes her book by calling for the return to issues of inclusive social justice, invoking Judith Butler's concept of 'precarity' as a unifying factor for attending to the most marginalised of women. In this way, she hopes to turn around the 'unfortunate mutual entanglement of neoliberalism with feminism', eviscerating the alliance from within.

There are now, as there has always been, real possibilities for renewed feminist discourses, as well as for the most diverse of feminist practices, designed to resist the exploitation or diminishment of any woman, including trans women and sex workers (however contested our understandings of these categories are). Above all, this will involve revaluing the world of care women still shoulder in support of both male domination and capitalism. Nowadays it also means extending notions of care to embrace concern for the world itself, while once more invoking old feminist visions that always placed the world of love and shared wellbeing (social reproduction, in the Marxist lexicon) above that of production for profit. It returns me, once more, to those struggles in and against the state, the rebuilding of local communities, and the regeneration overall of popular Left discourses for that ever-daunting task of maintaining the broadest possible alliances against a reactionary populism now on the move, and especially targeting women. If we fail, it will not only be in Alabama that we witness the triumph of political formations that are lethal for many women, as for oppressed and exploited people everywhere, indeed, that threaten to devour the future of us all.

Lynne Segal