

Feminism's Neoliberal Turn

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Within the past five years, a flurry of feminist manifestos have garnered intense mainstream media attention and reenergized feminist debates in the US, most trenchantly around the question of why middle-class women are still struggling to cultivate careers and raise children at the same time. Two of these, Anne-Marie Slaughter's *Why Women Still Can't Have It All* (2015) and Sheryl Sandberg's best-seller *Lean In: Women, Work and The Will to Lead* (2013) might well be said to have initiated this trend of high-power women publically and unabashedly identifying as feminists. Considered together with Emma Watson's September 2014 speech at the UN Women #HeforShe campaign launch, Beyoncé's "spectacular" appropriation of Chimamanda Adichie's talk *We Should All be Feminists*, and other widely publicized feminist enunciations, it seems safe to say that we have indeed moved from an arguably postfeminist moment (back?) to a feminist one. Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign and her endorsement by various liberal feminist organizations certainly reinforce the sense that we are witnessing the reentrance of feminism into "the sphere of public awareness, both in political discourse and popular culture".

Yet feminist themes have not merely been popularized and 'mainstreamed'. Rather, certain strands of feminism have also been mobilized to bolster oppressive hierarchies as well as neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics. Feminism's alignment with dominant ideologies has taken various forms: from the invocation of women's rights by different US administrations to justify imperialist interventions in majority Muslim countries to the deployment of feminist themes by European nationalist right-wing

parties in their anti-immigration campaigns (i.e., Marine Le Pen's National Front and others), and back to the US where liberal feminism is increasingly being identified with a hyper-individualized and entrepreneurial subject, further distancing it from any collective justice demands. Elsewhere I have argued that a new feminist variant has appeared on the political scene, one I have termed neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014). I have also suggested that the resurgence of the work-family balance is the site in which the contemporary entanglement of feminism with neoliberalism is most clearly articulated in the US.

Importantly, the notion of a happy work-family balance has been incorporated into the social imagination as a cultural good and is producing a new ideal of emancipated womanhood: a professional woman able to balance a successful career with a satisfying family life. This new feminist subject, however, is not only informed by a cost-benefit calculus where self-investment in the present is understood as ensuring future "returns", but she is also inflected through and through by race and class — in large part through a series of erasures. Indeed, I posit that this emergent feminist discourse disavows the reality that, most often, women of color, poor and immigrant women serve as the unacknowledged domestic and care-workers who enable professional women to strive towards "balance" in their lives. Thus, neoliberal feminism is engendering both a new ideal *feminist* subject as well as her invisible and disposable *female* "other".

If this is indeed the case, then the urgent questions for contemporary feminist theory and practice include: Why does neoliberalism need feminism at this particular historical juncture in order to reinforce its hegemony? In what ways do certain themes of feminism lend themselves to the neoliberal project? And, finally, what alternative politics can and should we propose to counter the evacuation of feminism's emancipatory impetus?

Works Cited

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Catherine Rottenberg is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Foreign Literatures and Linguistics and the Chair of the Gender Studies Program at Ben-Gurion University, Israel. Her publications include *Performing Americanness: Race, Class and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (University Press of New England, 2008), where she investigates how Jewish-American and African-American fiction in the early twentieth-century narrated the critical categories of identity, and *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side: Narratives Out of Time* (SUNY, 2013), where she resorts to “the city” as an analytical category for examining the transformation of Jewish-American and African-American female identity during the Jazz Age. More recently, she has published on the apparent “revive” of feminism and feminist debate under the neo-liberal context in “Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwoman Became Balanced” (*Feminist Studies* 40 no. 1, 2014) and “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism” (*Cultural Studies*, no. 28, 2014).