Thematic Review: Feminism in Neoliberal Times

The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism. By Catherine Rottenberg. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 264 pp. $29.95 (hardcover).

Pop-Feminist Narratives: The Female Subject under Neoliberalism in North America, Britain, and Germany. By Emily Spiers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 272 pp. $81.00 (hardcover).

Feminists Rethink the Neoliberal State: Inequality, Exclusion, and Change. Edited by Leela Fernandes. New York: New York University Press, 2018. 272 pp. $89.00 (hardcover), $30 (paperback).

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Has contemporary feminism been co-opted by neoliberal market forces, or does it remain a critical and resistant movement in the world today? Arguments on each side of this question have dominated feminist thinking since the publication of Nancy Fraser's 2009 essay "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." In her article, Fraser argues that second-wave feminism has unwittingly merged with neoliberal ideology to undercut the radical potential of feminist thought and action. Yet critiques of this position, by Nanette Funk and others, argue that Fraser's depiction of feminism takes socialist feminism as being representative of the movement as a whole and fails to see the ways in which feminism has changed and adapted to the present-day moment (Funk 2013). The majority of the literature to this point has fallen on either side of this argument, such that, as Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca (2018) put it, it has descended into a simple "good girls/bad girls dichotomy" with no clear way beyond this either/or framework.

The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism by Catherine Rottenberg is a key intervention in this ongoing debate and one that helps move the discussion beyond this simple opposition. It provides an overview of the term "feminist" as it has been reintegrated within popular culture and

liberal debate in the United States in the last decade. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* works from a variety of different source material: the "self-help" manifestos/memoirs of celebrity authors such as Sheryl Sandberg, Ivanka Trump, and Megyn Kelly; so-called mommy blogs by individual women charting their experiences of parenting online; and media coverage of contemporary debate in the United States about women's (in)ability to merge work and family life.

The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism argues that recent years in the United States have seen a movement from a postfeminist moment to a neoliberal feminist one. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, women were less inclined to identify with the term "feminist," believing that "the goals of feminism [had] — more or less — been achieved and that there [was] no longer any raison d'être for a mass woman's movement" (9). But more recently, Rottenberg argues, there has been a return of the term "feminist." It is now championed as an identity by some of the most visible women in the Western world: Beyoncé on stage, Sheryl Sandberg in a best-selling book, and Emma Watson at the helm of the United Nations' #HeforShe campaign. As Rottenberg puts it, "we are currently witnessing a historic moment in which it has finally become acceptable for highly visible young Western women to identify publicly as feminists" (79).

Yet, she cautions, this visibility is not to be embraced as a step toward greater equality or emancipation. Expanding the co-optation-versus-resistance debate, Rottenberg offers a different take. She argues for a push beyond this dualism, showing instead that this branch of popular feminism is already deeply imbued with neoliberal concerns. She argues that "neoliberal feminism is fast displacing liberal feminism" (54) and that "the concept of co-option is ultimately inadequate since it fails to capture the intricate and complex interactions between neoliberalism and feminism" (12). Taking for granted this alignment between neoliberalism and feminism allows Rottenberg to extend this debate by posing a deeper question, which provides the theoretical impetus for the book as a whole: Why has this merging of these two come into being at all? "Why might neoliberalism need feminism? What does neoliberal feminism do that postfeminism could not or cannot accomplish? What kind of cultural work does this particular variant of feminism carry out at this particular moment?" (7).

Rottenberg argues that neoliberal feminism places at its heart the importance of "balance" and, in particular, the "ultimate ideal" (13) of women to have both professional, high-reaching careers but also full and rich family lives. Texts by Sandberg, Trump, and Anne-Marie Slaughter,

as well as the mommy blogs and newspaper coverage that she analyzes, all evoke the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between work and family life. Throughout her analysis of these texts, Rottenberg stresses that structural complaints that look beyond the domestic and the personal are rarely, if ever, to be seen in the construction of this ideal. Gone is liberal feminism and its calls on the state and legal system to change in order to better protect women and enhance their lives. Instead, the problem of "balance" is presented as one that only the woman herself can answer: "she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality but also accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care … The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (55).

It is this inward turn, the shift from seeing feminist answers as lying in external provision and rather in the female self, that Rottenberg argues is why neoliberalism needs feminism. This neoliberal feminism has colonized "classic mainstream liberal feminism … [and] is helping to produce a particular kind of feminist subject" (59) who sees the answers to her problems as lying within herself, never with forces outside of her own control. "Creative individual solutions are presented as feminist and progressive" (59), and structural forces are continually and noticeably absent. Liberal claims on the state and legal system thus no longer need to be made; the neoliberal feminist has no need for any provisions beyond what she herself is individually capable of.

Rottenberg makes clear throughout *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* that this alignment between neoliberalism and feminism is far from a normative good, in that "this new and increasingly popular form of feminism has been curiously and unsettlingly unmoored from those key terms of equality, justice and emancipation that have informed women's movements and feminism since their inception" (11). Yet she is careful not to fall into the trap that many have accused Fraser's critique of contemporary feminism of promoting: that an original source for all feminist thinking and action is presumed that is implicitly anticapitalist in its beliefs. Rottenberg takes these iterations of popular feminism seriously, deconstructing these texts and discourse in order to show what work they are doing to circulate ideas about contemporary feminism. She is wary of attempts to define feminism, cautious that this has too often served as a means to premise it on white, Western conceptions that iron out important differences and contradictions, and she argues that interrogating these texts in this way exposes "the kind of cultural work

neoliberal feminism is carrying out, the kinds of subjects it helps to produce, and the way it mobilizes affect to generate passionate attachments to its ideals, particularly the happily balanced woman … [T]his move does not discard neoliberal feminism's claim to feminism but, rather, discloses and rejects its logic and political commitments" (171).

Pop-Feminist Narratives: The Female Subject under Neoliberalism in North America, Britain and Germany by Emily Spiers largely works in the same critical vein as Rottenberg, interrogating the ways in which contemporary feminism has merged with or adopted aspects of neoliberal ideology. Spiers identifies the contemporary trend in feminist autobiography and popular manifestos as "pop" feminism, with texts that "engage playfully with celebrity cultures, or even constitute the medium of choice for today's 'celebrity feminists'" (1). She distinguishes between those who, she argues, adopt certain modes that see them "'buy in' to the promises and premises of neoliberalism" (5), such as Caitlin Moran, Jessica Valenti, and Hadley Freeman, and others who "view pop as a medium that retains emancipatory potential for a young generation of pop-literate women and girls" (6), such as Roxane Gay, Andi Zeisler, and Ariel Levy.

As a literary scholar, she has two central concerns in the book: one, to analyze the "model of subjectivity" (8) that emerges in selected pop-feminist works and how this relates to ideas of identity and agency; and two, to analyze selected North American, British, and German contemporary fiction that addresses the same issues. It is thus ultimately concerned with analyzing whether pop-feminist manifestos or feminist literary fiction "offer a more probing engagement than the handbooks with the neoliberal socio-cultural constellations" (10).

The book is structured by country, looking at the three locations separately but also drawing connections across the texts considered in each. Spiers addresses the work of Kathy Acker and Mary Gaitskill in North America and the influence of Riot Grrrl culture on art and literature, as well as selected works by Maggie Nelson and Sheila Heti. In the British context, she looks at Gwendoline Riley, Scarlett Thomas, and Helen Walsh, setting them in the context of the pop feminism of Caitlin Moran et al., and in the shadow of chick lit in the contemporary U.K. context. In the final substantive chapter on Germany, the work of Charlotte Roche, Alina Bronsky, Helena Hegemann, Antonia Baum, and Kerstin Grether is examined in depth. This comparative methodology allows Spiers to highlight some "striking similarities" (235) across the three contexts in terms of both the blending of neoliberal

logic with feminist arguments and the more emancipatory space offered in the fictional works.

This normative distinction between pop-feminist handbooks and feminist literary fiction underpins much of the book's arguments. Unlike Rottenberg, she is more explicitly critical of many of the texts she explores here, arguing that "many pop-feminist handbooks lack a coherent feminist politics" and that they "draw on the rhetoric of collective feminist intervention while, in fact, rejecting the possibility of intersubjective relations in the form of coalitional feminist engagement" (9). Similarly, though, like Rottenberg, she sees in much contemporary pop feminism a blending of neoliberal ideas around the technology of the self and argues that this combination "creates a climate in which . . . feminist achievement becomes re-situated in the realm of self-empowerment, facilitated by the exercise of individual choice and the processes of self-improvement" (22). In placing pop-culture feminist manifestos against feminist literary fiction, Spiers clearly positions the fiction she analyzes in this book as being more worthy of the title "feminist." She argues that literature, more so than the autobiographical memoirs she addresses, allows for "the complexity and opacity of interiority, as well as moments of complicity with structures of power and oppression, to be revealed" (234). In this sense, while pop feminism presents "a regurgitation of postfeminist and neoliberal thinking," literature invites "us to see the future differently, to imagine a space where things do not merely go on as before" (238).

Feminists Rethink the Neoliberal State: Inequality, Exclusion, and Change, edited by Leela Fernandes, is a collection of essays that aim to push feminist social science to think more deeply about neoliberalism (or postliberalization, as Fernandes prefers to term it) in the world today. It provides a set of case studies that explore how neoliberal policies are influencing women in different geographical locations. As such, it is an important rejoinder to the ongoing debate on neoliberalism and feminism, in that it injects a much-needed dose of empiricism and in-depth case study research into a conversation that has largely been theoretical or, as in the two texts described earlier, more based around pop-culture narratives.

Fernandes opens the collection by warning against overly simplistic and Western-centric understandings of neoliberalization that often present "narratives of a vanishing state in the face of the all-encompassing force of neoliberalism" (3). Instead, these essays largely focus on the Global South (although with some notable interventions on the United States,

including an excellent piece on race, maternal activism, and education by Ujju Aggarwal), arguing for a more nuanced understanding of feminist interactions with neoliberalism and an "understanding of the state that moves beyond conceptions of a state in retreat on one hand and a state that simply mirrors the needs of capital on the other" (5). In doing so, the essays in this collection deftly "illustrate the impact of neoliberal policies and dismantle uniform conceptions of 'neoliberalism' or the 'neoliberal state'" (228). *Feminists Rethink the Neoliberal State* illustrates how neoliberal policies have had very different intentions and impacts and have worked from very different state structures across the globe, including specific pieces on Bangladesh, India, Ecuador, and the United States.

This is clearly shown in Lamia Karim's essay on Bangladesh. Karim illustrates how neoliberalism in Bangladesh did not work along the Western model of the dismantling of the state but rather "through a historically specific relationship between the state, donors, and NGOs" (106) in a postcolonial setting. The differing relations between the state and nongovernmental organizations, and the much larger service provision role that the former have, change the discourse around women's rights in the country.

Sometimes the concept of feminism disappears in the collection, to the extent that a few of the pieces make little to no reference of it. An equation of feminism with women is sometimes implicitly made. Also, while the collection is clearly working from an intersectional perspective, it does not use the specific language very frequently. It is making a clear intervention in thinking about intersectionality from a political economic perspective, and it could make its claims in this direction more strongly by interacting with intersectional theory more clearly.

Beyond these minor critiques, *Feminists Rethink the Neoliberal State* is a valuable contribution to the feminist literature on neoliberalism, showing the diverse ways in which neoliberalism exists in state structures and policies. It is an important and timely reminder that neoliberalism has many faces and meanings across differing regions and differing types of state structure in the world, and a key rejoinder to theoretical conceptions of a term that is more slippery and diffuse than is often suggested. Reducing it to a single monolith is of little use to either feminist theorists or social scientists.

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