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# Catherine Rottenberg

## THE RISE OF NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM

*In this paper, I argue that we are currently witnessing the emergence of neoliberal feminism in the USA, which is most clearly articulated in two highly publicized and widely read ‘feminist manifestos’: Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* (a *New York Times* best-seller) and Anne-Marie Slaughter’s ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have It All’ (the most widely read piece in the history of the *Atlantic*). Concentrating on the shifting discursive registers in *Lean In*, I propose that the book can give us insight into the ways in which the husk of liberalism is being mobilized to spawn a neoliberal feminism as well as a new feminist subject. This feminist subject accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. I further pose the question of why neoliberalism has spawned a feminist rather than a female subject. Why, in other words, is there any need for the production of a neoliberal feminism, which draws attention to a specific kind of inequality and engenders a particularly feminist subject? While this new form of feminism can certainly be understood as yet another domain neoliberalism has colonized by producing its own variant, I suggest that it simultaneously serves a particular cultural purpose: it hollows out the potential of mainstream liberal feminism to underscore the constitutive contradictions of liberal democracy, and in this way further entrenches neoliberal rationality and an imperialist logic. Indeed, 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 enlightened 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 critique.*

**Keywords** neoliberalism; feminism; feminist subject; Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*; Anne-Marie Slaughter’s ‘Why Woman Still Can’t Have It All’; work–family balance

A new trend is on the rise: increasingly, high-powered women are publicly and unabashedly espousing feminism. One has only to think of Anne-Marie Slaughter’s ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,’ a piece that appeared in the *Atlantic* in July 2012 and quickly became the most widely read article in the magazine’s history.<sup>1</sup> Then, in March 2013, Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* hit the

shelves and instantly became a *New York Times*' best-seller.<sup>2</sup> These self-declared feminist manifestos, the first written by a former State Department Director of Policy Planning and Princeton professor and the other by the Chief Operating Officer at Facebook, are being read in such large numbers – and generating so much discussion and media attention – that commentators have begun comparing Sandberg to Betty Friedan and Slaughter, by association, to Gloria Steinem.<sup>3</sup> They have announced that the Sandberg-Slaughter disagreement about the best way to facilitate women's ability to balance work and family is 'the most notable feminist row since Ms. Friedan refused to shake Gloria Steinem's hand decades ago.'<sup>4</sup> In an era often described as post-feminist (McRobbie 2009), it appears that feminism is currently being revived in the US public domain.

In the wake of *Lean In*'s publication and the ensuing media blitz, there has also been a flurry of criticism in various popular venues, ranging from the *New York Times* to *Al-Jazeera*.<sup>5</sup> Critics, particularly radical and socialist feminists, have acknowledged that voices like Sandberg's have helped to reinvigorate a public discussion about continued gender inequality in the USA, but they have also underscored that this emergent feminism is predicated on the erasure of the issues that concern the overwhelming majority of women in the USA and across the globe.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there have been debates about the increasing compatibility of mainstream feminism with the market values of neoliberalism (e.g. Eisenstein 2009, Fraser 2013). What does it mean, many longtime feminists are asking, that a movement once dedicated, however problematically, to women's liberation is now being framed in extremely individualistic terms, consequently ceasing to raise the spectre of social or collective justice? Building on this question, my concern revolves around a related but slightly different conundrum: namely, why is there any need for a *feminism* informed by the norms of neoliberalism?

I suggest that Sandberg's feminist manifesto can be seen as symptomatic of a larger cultural phenomenon in which neoliberal feminism is fast displacing liberal feminism. By examining in some detail the language and shifting discursive registers in the extraordinarily successful *Lean In* we can, I propose, gain insight into an on-going cultural process in which mainstream liberal feminism is being disarticulated and transmuted into a particular mode of neoliberal governmentality (Larner 2000, Brown 2005). Unlike classic liberal feminism whose *raison d'être* was to pose an immanent critique of liberalism, revealing the gendered exclusions within liberal democracy's proclamation of universal equality, particularly with respect to the law, institutional access, and the full incorporation of women into the public sphere, this new feminism seems perfectly in sync with the evolving neoliberal order. Neoliberal feminism, in other words, offers no critique – immanent or otherwise – of neoliberalism. More specifically, *Lean In* reveals the ways in which the husk of liberalism is being mobilized to spawn a neoliberal feminism, as well as a new

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 forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair.

In what follows, I briefly define neoliberal governmentality and its specific mode of governance, while arguing that a new form of feminism is coalescing. I then proceed by demonstrating how *Lean In* utilizes terms borrowed from liberal feminism, but effectively calls into being a new neoliberal feminist subject, one that is distinct from her liberal feminist counterpart. Focusing on three of Sandberg's central phrases – (1) internalizing the revolution; (2) lean in; and (3) the leadership ambition gap – I show how they are all informed by a market rationality. Finally, I pose the question of why neoliberalism has spawned a feminist rather than simply a female subject at all. While this emerging form of feminism can certainly be understood as yet another domain neoliberalism has colonized by producing its own variant, I suggest that it simultaneously serves a *particular* cultural purpose: it hollows out the potential of mainstream liberal feminism to underscore the constitutive contradictions of liberal democracy, and in this way further entrenches neoliberal rationality and an imperialist logic. Each woman's success becomes a feminist success, which is then attributed to the USA's enlightened political order, as well as to its moral and political superiority.

## Neoliberal rationality

In her germinal article, 'Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,' Wendy Brown argues that it is critical to understand the current US political landscape as one in which neoliberal rationality has become the dominant mode of governance. This mode of governance is neither limited to the economic sphere nor to state policies but rather 'produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social' (Brown 2005, p. 37). Consequently, neoliberalism is never simply about a set of economic policies or an economic system that facilitates intensified privatization, deregulation, and corporate profits, but rather is itself a modality of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense of regulating the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault *et al.* 1991, Lemke 2002, Brown 2005). Neoliberalism, in other words, is a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors. New political subjectivities and social

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

Drawing on Brown as well as the work of Nikolas Rose (1993) and other contemporary theorists of governmentality (e.g. Barry *et al.* 1996), Wendy Larner (2000) has similarly argued that neoliberalism is both a political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices that facilitate the governing of individuals. This form of governance transforms the logic by which institutions such as schools, workplaces, health and welfare agencies operate, while creating a new form of selfhood, which ‘encourages people to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being’ (Larner 2000, p. 13). Collective forms of action or well-being are eroded, and a new regime of morality comes into being, one that links moral probity even more intimately to self-reliance and efficiency, as well as to the individual’s capacity to exercise his or her own autonomous choices. Most disturbing for Larner, however, is the way neoliberal governmentality undoes notions of social justice, while usurping the concept of citizenship by producing economic identities as the basis for political life.

More recently, the prominent feminist theorist Nancy Fraser (2013) has decried the growing complicity of certain dominant stands of feminism with neoliberal capitalism. In her provocative article, ‘Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,’ Fraser claims that second-wave feminism’s ultimate privileging of recognition (i.e. identity claims) over redistribution (i.e. economic justice) is responsible for the convergence of contemporary feminism with neoliberal capitalism. The foregoing of economic analyses, particularly by poststructuralist feminists, in other words, has led, disastrously, to strengthening the spirit of the neoliberal stage of capitalism. The current merging of feminism with neoliberalism is consequently understood as the legacy of second-wave feminism’s myopic refusal to sustain a materialist critique.<sup>7</sup> While I do not agree with Fraser’s ascription of culpability, I do believe that her article is a key intervention in the discussion, since it underscores the emergence of a contemporary mode of feminism profoundly informed by a market rationality.

However, the question of why neoliberalism has any need of feminism at all still remains. The emergence of neoliberal feminism during this particular historical juncture serves specific objectives, as I will argue, but to place the blame on the shoulders of second-wave feminism is, as Ozlem Aslan and Zeynep Gambetti have convincingly argued, to ‘misrepresent the “cunning of history,”’ while subscribing to a causal view of the past that ‘constructs unitary subjects’ (p. 145). My claim, therefore, is that the contemporary convergence between neoliberalism and feminism involves the production of a new kind of feminism that is eviscerating classic, mainstream liberal feminism.<sup>8</sup> This neoliberal feminism, in turn, is helping to produce a particular kind of feminist subject. Using key liberal terms, such as equality, opportunity, and free choice,

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 – all 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: *Lean In* should not be understood as a memoir, self-help book or a career management guide, but rather draws on these genres in order to engender a ‘feminist manifesto,’ one dedicated to convincing women to pursue their goals vigorously (Sandberg 2013, pp. 9–10). The book is motivated by a desire to revive a feminist discussion and make good on the promise of ‘true equality’ – one of the central cornerstones of liberal democracy. Liberal feminism accordingly appears to serve as the text’s scaffolding.

In the very first pages of *Lean In*, Sandberg majestically announces that women in the USA and the developed world are better off today than they have ever been in the entire history of humankind: ‘We stand on the shoulders of the women who came before us, women who had to fight for the rights we now take for granted’ (p. 4). She also insists that women in the West should be grateful because they are centuries ahead of the unacceptable treatment of women in places like Afghanistan and Sudan. It is only by sheer luck that some women are born into families in the USA rather than ‘one of the many places in the world where women are denied basic rights’ (Sandberg 2013, p. 38).

The discussion is thus immediately framed within a progressive trajectory and a well-worn binary that positions the liberated West in opposition to the subjugated rest. The USA and western democracies are presented as the pinnacles of civilization, which have been moving towards the key goal of true equality between men and women. ‘Gender equality,’ in turn, becomes the benchmark for civilization, as Sara Farris has recently underscored, while liberal principles are set up as the unassailable standards of the good (Farris 2012). At first glance, this framing seems to deflect the question of continued inequality at home by projecting true oppression elsewhere, and it is no coincidence that

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 In* does not ultimately use this anti-Islam trope to turn the 'gaze of 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 tells us, women are still lagging behind in terms of representation at the top. Gender inequality is thus associated with a dearth of women in the higher echelons of powerful institutions. On the one hand, then, Sandberg conceives of liberalism and the liberal feminist struggle as responsible for producing the contemporary cultural landscape, which is one of historic opportunities for women in the West in general and in the USA more specifically. On the other hand, she proceeds to map out what needs to be done in order to move beyond the current impasse and finally fulfill the promises of the women's movement as well as of liberal democracy itself.

It is also in these first few pages that Sandberg sets up her own progressive liberal credentials by summoning the notion of equality and underscoring just how central a principle it is. Lamenting the fact that the feminist revolution of the 1970s has stalled, she proclaims that 'the promise of equality is not the same as true equality' (p. 7). This and other statements, interspersed in the text, make it clear that Sandberg is attempting to situate herself within a longer liberal feminist tradition; her objective, she repeatedly states, is to move towards a more equal world. In addition, throughout the book she alludes to other key liberal political principles, such as fair treatment and equal opportunity. And while the text's language is not always coherent or consistent, the emphasis is certainly on creating conditions that would allow women to make freer choices about work and family. Sandberg even gestures towards the structural inequalities that still exist in the USA. She tells her reader that she is aware that institutional barriers remain and admits that there is a need to eliminate them. But these remarks are limited and made in passing, while the vast majority of the book focuses on what are considered the more substantial barriers to women's success: the internal ones.

Before turning to an examination of the book's key terms, it is important to note that the 'lean in' language and framework are reminiscent, in many ways, of other now classic feminist texts geared to 'popular culture and media exposure,' (Stansell 2010, p. 206), such as *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Beauty Myth*. All of these books – Sandberg's included – attempt to identify the source of a recurrent (liberal) paradox: Given that women's opportunities and progress

are no longer obstructed by discriminatory laws and exclusionary institutions, what are the causes of (white middle class) women's continued 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 Woolf'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.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in contrast to both Friedan and Wolf, *Lean In*'s focus is decidedly not on confronting or changing social pressures, but rather on what 'women can change themselves,' their '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 (2010) 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 recognizably 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 *Lean In* 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's book, 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 *Lean In*, this kind of criticism ultimately fails to underscore what is indeed new in feminist manifestos like Sandberg's. If we understand *Lean In* 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* inequality and consequently cannot offer any sustained analytic of the structures of male dominance, power, or privilege. In this emergent feminism, then, there is a liberal wrapping, while the content – namely, its mode of operation – is neoliberal through and through.

### **Tipping the scales: metamorphosing liberalism into neoliberalism**

True to its title, *Lean In* is primarily concerned with encouraging women to ‘lean in’ to their careers. The book lays out various strategies for facilitating women’s ability to foster their professional ambition. In the process, Sandberg coins three phrases, which play a central role in *Lean In* and which have, since the book’s publication, begun to circulate in the public domain and the mass media: internalizing the revolution, lean in, and the leadership ambition gap. Before turning to explore how they operate together to produce a specific kind of feminist consciousness, I briefly lay out the book’s rationale for introducing these particular terms.

According to Sandberg’s logic, the first and fundamental step in reorienting women towards a successful career is ‘internalizing the revolution.’ This presumably involves accepting (by making personal) the need to keep moving towards true equality between men and women (signifying, in this context, equal representation in powerful institutions). By coming to terms with and working through their internal obstacles, women will then be able to muster the self-confidence necessary to push themselves forward towards their professional goals. The text suggests that it is incumbent on women to create effective ways of overcoming their fears – of being too outspoken, aggressive, or more powerful than men. Getting rid of these internal impediments is crucial for expediting women’s ability to lean into their careers, which becomes the second crucial stage in reorienting their priorities. Women, in Sandberg’s words, too often ‘hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in’ (p. 8). Only when women finally internalize the revolution, triumph over their internal obstacles and actively lean in to their careers will they be poised to accomplish one of *Lean In*’s key feminist objectives: closing the ‘leadership ambition gap.’ Eliminating this gap constitutes the final stage in the reorientation process. Indeed, the surest way to reach the still elusive goal of gender equality is by encouraging more women to move up the professional ladder and into leadership positions. Sandberg maintains that as more and more ‘women begin entering into high level positions, giving strong and powerful voice to their needs and concerns, conditions for all women will improve’ (p. 7).

This amorphous ‘ambition gap’ very quickly comes to stand in for inequality, radically reducing inequality to the absence of women in positions at the top. Consequently, other classic liberal feminist goals, such as fair

treatment, equal institutional access, and women's full 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* – using a liberal frame while performatively undoing that very same frame – thus demonstrates very clearly, how neoliberal feminism takes shape under the legitimating cloth of liberal feminist discourse.

Premising her manifesto on the conviction that gender inequality still exists in the USA, Sandberg patriotically invokes the liberal notions of equality, equal opportunity, and free choice in order to reinvigorate a public feminist discussion. Yet, when examined more closely, the three central phrases she invents overrun and then evacuate her liberal framework, effectively replacing it with a different rationality. 'Internalizing the revolution,' 'lean in' and closing the 'ambition gap' operate together in the text in order to call into being a subject who is compelled and encouraged to conform to the norms of the market while assuming responsibility for her own well-being. Moreover, 'true equality' is predicated upon individuals moving up the professional ladder, *one woman at a time*.

The notions of internalizing the revolution and lean in, first and foremost, conjure up a discrete and isolated feminist consciousness. The call to internalize revolution is particularly disconcerting as it assumes that the revolution has in some sense already taken place, and therefore all women need to do is to rouse themselves by absorbing and acting on this reality. Moreover, it not only neutralizes the radical idea of collective uprising by atomizing the revolutionary agents and transferring the site of activity from the public arena to each individual's psyche, but also conceptualizes change as an internal, solipsistic and affective matter. There is no orientation beyond the self, which makes this form of feminism distinct. Revolution, in other words, is transformed from mass mobilization into an interiorized and individual activity, thereby stripping it of any potential political valence in the Arendtian sense of 'acting in concert' (Gordon 2002). This turn inward helps to produce an individuated feminist agent who, alone, is accountable for garnering her own 'revolutionary' energy. That energy, of course, is not being steered towards the toppling of any political order or even about coming to an awareness of systemic male domination, as was the goal of even liberal feminism in the 1970s, but rather such energy is transmogrified into ambition and metamorphosed into the nurturing of each individual woman's desire to reach the top of the power pyramid. The exhortation to lean in to their careers thus effectively reorients women away from conceptions of solidarity and towards their *own particular development*, which, to stay on 'track' as it were, requires constant self-monitoring.

Angela McRobbie (2013) has argued in a slightly different context that the lean in groups that Sandberg has managed to create – by sheer force of will – are ghostly resurrections of the conscious-raising groups of the 1970s. Rather than serving as a vehicle for raising women's awareness of sexual politics or the

ramifications of male dominance and sexism in women's everyday lives, these lean in groups are geared to encourage women to help 'play the corporate game more deftly' (McRobbie 2013, p. 24). The very conception of encouraging women in these groups to 'lean in' to their individual careers is antithetical to working together towards any *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 feminism's 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 who are 'off-ramping' the career track, particularly when they have children, concluding with her by now familiar solution to the stalled revolution: more women in positions of power. There is no dwelling on the signification of 'true equality' beyond the 'trickle down' statement that it will be achieved only when more women 'rise 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 lean in' (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 – even 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 this is not—working separately for a similar but separate goal, perhaps.

In these final pages Sandberg ironically converts the notion of 'working 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. 171). This is exactly the kind of top down approach for which many feminists have already harshly criticized Sandberg.<sup>10</sup> 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 – which, again, many critics have rightly been quick to underscore – and 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 'equal moral personhood' or each person 'being an end in and of herself,' which have a long history in the West and in the USA (Stansell 2010, Abbey 2011), this new

feminism inaugurates a subject who is being called upon to ‘provide for [her] own needs and service [her] own ambitions’ (Brown 2006, p. 694). She may conceive of herself as an end, but everyone else becomes mere means. This feminist subject’s ‘moral’ probity, moreover, is measured by how well and efficiently she provides for her own self-care, which entails calculation, initiative and innovation. Neoliberal feminism is predominantly concerned with instating a feminist subject who epitomizes ‘self-responsibility,’ and who no longer demands anything from the state or the government, or even from men as a group; there is no longer any attempt to confront the tension between liberal individualism, equality, and those social pressures that potentially obstruct the realization of ‘true’ equality. Moreover, as David Eng has cogently pointed out in a different context, this subject is also a post-race one who helps to ensure, yet again, ‘the forgetting of race’ (Eng 2010, p. 4). The creation of the neoliberal feminist subject thus bolsters the assumption that the struggle for racial equality – just like the feminist revolution – has, in some sense, already occurred, been successful and is, consequently, a thing of the past. At most, there is a gesturing towards the importance of professional women speaking up in their respective workplaces so as to make targeted or surgical improvements. There is no mention of collective solutions to historic injustices: indeed, the neoliberal feminist subject is divested of any orientation toward the common good.

### **Happily ever after: affect and the new feminist ideal**

If, up until now, I have underscored the concern with inspiring women to ‘dream big’ professionally, here it is crucial to underscore that *Lean In*’s emphasis on career development is not intended, by any means, to come at the expense of family life. On the contrary, Sandberg’s call on women to lean in to their careers is presented in the text as a reaction to and an attempt to counter a rising and disturbing trend, where ‘highly trained women are scaling back and dropping out of the workforce in high numbers’ when they have children (p. 14). The book, time and again, intimates that once individual women value their own professional development more highly and ‘lean in’ to their careers, they will be better poised to carve out a more effective and felicitous work–family balance. Consequently, the feminist ideal being presented here is emphatically not the one-dimensional or one-track professional woman who sacrifices family for career, but rather a high-powered woman who manages to balance a spectacularly successful career with a satisfying home life. In this way, neoliberal feminism not only interpellates a subject responsible for her own self-care but this subject is also normalized by this address, called upon to desire *both* professional success and personal fulfillment, which almost always translates into motherhood. What is reinforced is the message that ‘progressive’ and successful women’s well-being can only (or, reading more generously, is

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 this feminism holds out hinges not only on one's active desire to cultivate a profession *and* on having a spouse and children, but also on one's ability to calibrate a perfect equilibrium between the private and the public spheres. 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.<sup>11</sup> The widespread mobilization and acceptance of terms, such as a *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 task 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 millennium's feminist promise, then, it seems that 'progressive' ambitious women are compelled and encouraged to pursue happiness through constructing a self-tailored work–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 inwards, 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 the children's bedtime – is elusive, since well-being is famously difficult to gauge, but, as a consequence of affect's very elusiveness, requires constant calculation and optimizing of personal resources. Thus, the quest for not just a sane equilibrium but a satisfying equilibrium further inscribes an entrepreneurial subject and 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.

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

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,<sup>12</sup> Taylor describes how potentially high-achieving young women are no longer interested in investing in relationships during their college years – years when they feel they need to be concerned with building their professional resumé. The reasons these university students give for their decision to find ‘hookup 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 – as I have indicated – is not unique. Indeed, the buzz surrounding Sandberg’s book occurred in the wake of the media hype surrounding Anne-Marie Slaughter’s ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have it All,’ an essay that immediately went viral and, within a week of its publication, had been accessed by over one million people. These women have clearly tapped into a cultural sore spot, and they are quickly becoming the most visible representatives of mainstream feminism in the USA in the early twenty-first century.

The media have continuously pitted Sandberg and Slaughter against one another, suggesting that their feminist stances are seriously at odds. This is actually quite ironic, as the two women’s discursive registers, as well as their basic assumptions are virtually indistinguishable. Like Sandberg, Slaughter cloaks her feminist manifesto in the liberal language of equality, and like Sandberg, Slaughter also effectively disarticulates liberal feminism and transmutes it into a neoliberal variant. Both women – in slightly divergent ways – conjure up an intensely individuated subject; the differences are, in the end, merely a matter of emphasis.

While Sandberg urges women to reaffirm their commitment to work, Slaughter urges women to reaffirm their commitment to family. Yet, the end goal is the same for both women: namely, providing women more latitude so that they can carve out their own felicitous work–family balance. ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have it All’ focuses on legitimating women’s ‘natural’ commitment towards their children, and, in the article, Slaughter urges high powered women to speak out about the value of family, exhorting them to demand changes in the norms of their respective workplaces. Yet Slaughter, again like Sandberg, is adamant about encouraging women not to abandon their career aspirations, even when they have children, and her overall objective is

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 high powered women taking personal initiative and demanding things like flex 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 notion of *social* 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 – not 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 'true' feminism is too easy and, I believe, misguided, both because such a claim assumes that there is one true definition of feminism (and that '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 *Lean In* and 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' reflect and (re)produce – is currently 'doing.'

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By way of conclusion, I would like to offer a set of speculations about why we are witnessing the emergence of a neoliberal feminism. To begin with, it is important to ask the question of why neoliberalism acknowledges and revives a discourse about continued gender inequality at all. This in and of itself seems somewhat paradoxical, given neoliberalism's disregard and steady erosion of liberal political principles, such as liberty, formal equality, solidarity and the rule of law. Why, in other words, is there any need for the production of a neoliberal *feminism*, which draws attention to a specific kind of inequality? Given that neoliberal rationality individuates subjects, eliding structural inequalities while instating market rationality, why is there any need for a feminist variant when a female (as opposed to a feminist) neoliberal subject might do the job just as well or better?

The rise of neoliberal feminism, I posit, can be traced to multiple sources. One has to do with the ability of neoliberal rationality, as the dominant or hegemonic mode of governance, to colonize more and more domains (Harvey 2005).<sup>13</sup> In the USA, all strands of feminism, even liberal feminism, have

always operated, at least in theory, as a critique of the dominant political order. This critique has ranged from an immanent one – embodied in liberal feminism – which endeavored to show up the contradictions between liberal democracy’s theoretical commitment to equality and its actual practice of gendered exclusions and discrimination, to a revolutionary one, which insisted on an overhaul of the patriarchal or masculinist foundations of modern society. From this perspective, the production of neoliberal feminism makes cultural sense, since it becomes one more domain that neoliberal governmentality colonizes and remakes in its own image. This is a process, in Stuart Hall’s words, that performs the massive work of ‘transcoding while remaining in sight of the lexicon on which it draws’ (2011, p. 711). As more and more white middle-class women enter and remain in the public sphere even after they have children – by choice and increasingly by necessity – this emergent feminist discourse helps to neutralize the potential critique from other strands of feminism. No longer concerned with issues, such as the gendered wage gap, sexual harassment, rape or domestic violence, ambitious individual *middle-class women* themselves become both the problem and the solution in the neoliberal feminist age. And by tapping into what Sara Ahmed has termed the current ‘happiness industry’ (Ahmed 2010), neoliberal feminism attempts to ensure that the new feminist subject is oriented and orients herself towards the goal of finding her own personal and felicitous work–family balance.

In addition, the public acknowledgement of continued gender inequalities in the USA may actually serve to bolster a waning sense of liberal democracy’s perfectibility and even continued feasibility. At a time when the political principles of liberal democracy are being eroded by the norms and practices of the market, the production of neoliberal *feminism* may help to sustain the weakening belief that the USA still aspires to fulfill liberal democracy’s promise of ‘true equality’ (while simultaneously diffusing the threat from other forms of emancipatory movements, like anti-racist and/or radical feminism). Whereas in recent years the so-called plight of women in Muslim countries served to deflect attention away from continued gender inequality in the USA, today a specific kind of internal critical gaze may have become increasingly necessary in order to do some of the same cultural work. The publication of these self-proclaimed feminist tracts not only creates the powerful impression that the USA is willing and able to sustain self-critique, but also – and importantly – that it is still committed to and governed by liberal rather than neoliberal or market principles.

This ostensible self-critique, in other words, serves to bolster the US’s sense of openness, as well as moral and political superiority while (re)inscribing an imperialist logic. On the one hand, the ‘progressive’ critical eye is turned back on the USA itself, which, I posit, marks a new development in the neoliberal landscape. Moving beyond the strategic use of homonationalism or ‘queer liberalism,’ where there is an instrumentalization of gay and lesbian rights so that western democracies and the USA can assert a kind of global



progressive superiority (Puar 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 mobilize ‘gender equality’ as the benchmark for civilization. This, too, helps to neutralize criticism from other strands of feminism, as well as from other countries about continued gender inequality inside the USA, helps to forget, yet again, racial inequality by focusing on a post-racial and individualized (‘progressive’) 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 ‘responsibilizing’ women and by producing individuated feminist subjects who have transmuted liberation into self-care and 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 (2011) and Wendy Lerner (2000), who have been careful to underscore that neoliberalism is not a seamless monolithic apparatus. Despite the power and 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 ‘true 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 equal rights and social justice to a discourse of positive affect. In ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,’ for example, Slaughter acknowledges that the crisis she explores is one that is most relevant for ‘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](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne-Marie_Slaughter) [Accessed July 30, 2013]
- 2 See, for example, Suddath (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 later work, however, not only takes on the perspective of hindsight, arguing that this privileging only intensified over the years, but more specifically targets second-wave feminism for having failed to sustain a critique of capitalism. Furthermore, she suggests that second-wave feminism, by forfeiting the demand for economic redistribution, ended up serving as a key enabler for 'the new spirit of neoliberalism' (2012, p. 220). In this later work, Fraser also adopts a three rather than two dimensional account of injustice: in addition to her well-known insistence that a truly emancipatory feminism must integrate demands for redistribution and recognition, in *Fortunes of Feminism* she adds the demand for political representation (2012, p. 225).
- 8 My claim is thus more in line with Angela McRobbie (2013) who has recently suggested that we are witnessing the folding of US liberal feminism into current neoliberal modes of governmentality. However, unlike

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 – my focus is on the way neoliberal feminism is not only eviscerating liberal feminism but helping to produce a particular kind of feminist – as 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. *The Beauty Myth*, by contrast, was first published in 1990, at a time when the term post-feminism was gaining currency. Wolf’s text 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 feminist ideal—what I term the Balanced Woman—helps to keep women with one foot firmly planted in the private sphere. But this is only one of the many effects of the emergence of the new norm of ‘progressive’ womanhood (2014).
- 12 Marissa Mayer is President and CEO of Yahoo!. She was also ranked number 14 on the list of America’s most powerful businesswomen of 2012 by Fortune Magazine.
- 13 David Harvey has argued that neoliberalism has not only become hegemonic as a mode of discourse, but it has become common-sense: ‘It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world’ (2005, p. 3).

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