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Gender, Power and Feminist Resistance

Lynne Segal

This book illustrates that there are few women where power rules. At the same time women all over the world are suffering under the effects of neoliberalism. Despite the huge differences between different groups of men, overall they still have higher wages and better pension provision than women overall, with the work of care remaining undervalued wherever it occurs. Nevertheless, some women have risen to extraordinary and unprecedented positions of power, just when other women face endless hardship, or worse. Some powerful female figures are at the very heart of the neoliberal order, and hence represent a type of mainstreaming of feminism – one now apparently compatible with our political elite. The media's constant promotion of a populist feminism encourages women to focus simply on themselves, if they are to feel empowered. This reshaping of feminist discourse, so distant from the collective agenda in the early years of the women's liberation movement, is now fully incorporated into the promotion of market ideologies around the globe.

From a feminist perspective, this chapter sets out to sketch the development of the last decades leading up to the contemporary neoliberal political situation. What are the consequences for women and other disadvantaged groups? What role can feminism play, and which alliances can feminists join, if they want to resist the hazards of the global neoliberal order? The examples are drawn mainly from a British context, though linking up to other European nations and the USA.

Losing the Struggle?

I am writing this chapter at the beginning of 2017, when that intermediate zone between life and politics has never felt so shaken. 'How do we join the resistance?', the American feminist Barbara Ehrenreich reports being startled when asked this question by the most unexpected people at a suburban lunch, immediately after Trump's electoral victory.¹ But is resistance still possible, others are wondering? More fundamentally, we might ask, is feminism still relevant to any such resistance, and if so how? Could it be true, as some such as Nancy Fraser suggest, that feminism was long ago co-opted and tamed by, even complicit with, the forces that have brought us here?²

Not just gloom, but something approaching cataclysmic upheaval is expressed by many on the left, making it hard not to feel like a rabbit frozen in the headlights of calamity: 'Politics will never be the same', I keep reading – not after Brexit, not after the inauguration of Donald Trump, not after the collapse of the liberal centre in government, in those democracies where it has long held sway. All this 'should never have happened', so many people seem to agree, before quickly adding, 'and now things can only get worse'. A type of apocalyptic feeling can be sensed not just, or even primarily, on the far-left

margins of my world,³ but is shared by all those I encounter who still want to see better futures for the majority, not just for a fraction of the one per cent. In 2016 alone, 5,000 migrants died in the Mediterranean, while in the UK, one of the editors of the *London Review of Books* summed up the extreme damage caused by the billions slashed from social care budgets over recent years as leaving ‘Britain, but especially England... a darker, dirtier and more dangerous place’.⁴ Racism, never far from the surface, has been given new authority in the upsurge of anti-Islamic, anti-immigrant sentiment. Already in the opening decade of the twenty-first century, it was clear that our feminist fashioning of new vernaculars for discussing sexism, gender equality, men’s violence against women and, above all, for envisaging social transformations through democratic engagement emphasizing the significance of intimacy, care, and shared responsibility for the lives of others, were now being refashioned to suit the abrasively competitive, individualist, neoliberal cultural climate of ever-more invasive market reasoning. Today I/we can’t see past those headlights threatening only danger ahead without revisiting how we got into these austere times, despite our alternative dreams and resistance.

Given its various contradictions, the concept of neoliberalism remains controversial for some as a way of describing our current moment.⁵ These inconsistencies in neoliberalism appear over the shifting role of state (shrinking parts of it, while amplifying others), as well as in the absurdity of the weight it places on choice, freedom and deregulation, just when exclusion, restriction and over-regulation are the conditions of all too many of us.⁶ However, what is clear are the many destructive effects of the ever-deepening ideological climate and set of policies ushered into Britain by Margaret Thatcher from 1979, especially as they impacted on women and our earlier feminist hopes. From within its own differing context, across the Atlantic Thatcher’s great friend Ronald Reagan was elected the following year with a similar political agenda. In Britain, this involved systematic attempts to reduce welfare spending (often failing because of rising unemployment) and the privatization of state resources, beginning with selling off public housing, as well as the undermining of trade unions which soon resulted in shrinking wage packets and precarious working conditions for many workers, who then faced constant threats of closure or redundancy. This accompanied the lowering of taxes on private wealth, and soon the removal of state regulation over wealth production, first known as ‘monetarism’.

Meanwhile, at the very same time as regulations were removed on the corporate commercial and financial sector, especially after the ‘Big Bang’ of 1986, opening up London’s financial centre to overseas banks, there was increasing bureaucratic regulation of all public institutions in their servicing of social needs, whether dealing with the nation’s health, education, housing, security, or any other centralized or municipal provision for people’s general welfare and development.⁷ This political project, now labelled ‘neoliberalism’, had its roots back in the 1930s, with Friedrich Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) providing one of its iconic texts, advancing the belief that the government planning and moderate

redistribution (which would characterise most post-war social democracies through their investment in industry, public resources and social welfare) undermined individual autonomy and led inevitably to totalitarianism.⁸

With its fundamental mantra of individual autonomy and competitiveness, neoliberal sentiment necessarily enshrined the marginalization of, if not disdain and disparagement towards, those seen as dependent, needy and vulnerable, people calling upon the resources of what Thatcher derided and stigmatized as the ‘nanny state’. In her perversely upended version of reality, it was the welfare state that created ‘dependency’, by encouraging ‘idleness and cheating’; trade unions that created unemployment.⁹ Feminist thinking at the time, quite as much as any Keynesian consensus, was thus anathema to Margaret Thatcher: *‘The feminists hate me, don’t they? And I don’t blame them. For I hate feminism. It is poison’*, her former advisor Paul Johnson recalled her saying.¹⁰ Certainly, her outlook was a total assault on that earlier feminist project of social transformation to support a woman-friendly world, one genuinely valuing all those traits traditionally regarded as ‘feminine’ through public investment in care and community welfare. Indeed, much of Thatcher’s purpose was precisely to banish any such utopian ideal that a more equal, nurturing world was possible. We have only to recall her notorious declaration: ‘there is no society, there are only individuals and their families’, and her eagerness to pursue ‘the enemy within’, those trying to protect jobs and wages. Indeed, Thatcher’s radical conservatism led her to dismiss the entirety of previous progressive struggles, even the French Revolution of 1789, usually accepted as the birth of modern liberal democracies, enshrining the rights of all its citizens. In her view, it was merely: ‘a utopian attempt to overthrow a traditional order... in the name of abstract ideas, formulated by vain intellectuals’.¹¹

Feminists too were her enemy within – at least so long as we supported an oppositional agenda. And just as we feared, Thatcher’s policies would end up hugely deepening the divisions between women, when poverty almost doubled and unemployment tripled under her administration.¹² As we’ll see, she also sowed the seeds for a new form of discord around feminism, as the rise of career or aspirational feminism (now labelled ‘neoliberal feminism’) became more pervasive in the western media and popular imagination, promoting the falsehood that all women could flourish and succeed in this world so long as we vigorously pursue our own self-interest.¹³

Few of us were really prepared for quite how much worse things could get, for how hard it would prove to shift the market-driven agenda, even when this form of aggressive corporate capitalism – almost – collapsed from its inherent destructiveness. One might have thought that the global economic meltdown of 2007-2008, when banks around the world were on the point of collapse from their own speculative gambling on profit – selling and reselling of worthless ‘derivatives’ – should have exposed the fundamental neoliberal fallacy that markets can and do self-regulate. What is always kept hidden from

us is that this was never true, since there has always been state intervention in order to maintain the free flow of capital. Indeed, the more the neoliberal experiment has failed, the more the supposedly non-interventionist, welfare-shrinking states have stepped in to shore them up. In Britain, failing banks were saved with massive state subsidy and partial nationalization, before smoothing their return to private ownership. As many economists illustrate, including the British based Mariana Mazzucato, the injustice of this is that profits have remained strictly private and massive financial benefits have accrued to the wealthy few during the current financial crisis (and are only lightly taxed, if taxed at all), while losses are shared and paid for by the tax-payer through the socializing of risk.¹⁴

Ten years later, the majority of us are *still* paying in falling living standards and the imposition of further austerity cutbacks in basic welfare provision, making Britain's welfare spending now lower than all but the very poorest countries in Europe.¹⁵ This is because the crisis of banking liquidity in 2007-2008 was used dishonestly to reinforce the ideology of the need for welfare cuts and further austerity. With the help of a willing media, the Tory-led government of 2010 managed to convince the British public that Labour's overspending had been the main cause of the economic crisis. In reality, when Labour was in government (first under Tony Blair, and then very briefly under Gordon Brown) while indeed increasing welfare spending and decreasing inequality, it had also managed to lower the national debt in its first decade in government after 1997. But it rose sharply after 2008 due to the government borrowing over a trillion pounds to lend to the banks to cover their bad debts and save shareholders' assets. As the political economist Colin Leys notes in 2016, the 'failure of the past Labour leadership to burn these basic facts into the public consciousness' has meant that they have 'implicitly endorsed' a treacherous myth they should have been attacking.¹⁶ All this has continued to further a process of a gigantic redistribution of wealth, not downwards, but ever-upwards.¹⁷

Moreover, as feminists argue and all economists can confirm, these ongoing cuts in welfare provision invariably hit large swathes of women hardest, precisely because of our continuing primacy in the provision of care, both inside and outside the home. As the British Fawcett Society reveals, since the beginning of the financial implosion in 2008, close to a million women have moved into low paid, insecure work; the number of under-employed women has nearly doubled, and 371,000 women have moved into self-employment, typically also with very low pay.¹⁸ Meanwhile, some £4.6 billion was cut from adult social care budgets in England.¹⁹ Adding to the gloomy picture, the latest research from another feminist group, the Women's Budget Group (WBG), working in association with the Runnymede Trust in Britain, highlights figures on the triple disadvantage faced by low-income, black and minority women.²⁰ Their analysis reveals that these particular women have shouldered by far the greatest burden since 2010, and that cumulatively by 2020 black and Asian women are set to lose around twice as much money as low income white men as a result of tax and benefit changes. Summarizing all the relevant

research into the effects of austerity in Britain today, the political geographer Danny Dorling concludes that ‘85% of cuts to benefits have already been taken from women ... Almost the entire UK government deficit is to be repaid through sacrifices made by women.’²¹ Despite the huge differences between different groups of men, overall they still have higher wages and better pension provision than women, with the work of care remaining as undervalued as it is underpaid – undervalued because it is underpaid, wherever it occurs.²²

Most significantly, however, the neoliberal cultural framings that saturate our daily papers feed a conservative populism that fluctuates between triggering yearnings for success and significance, on the one hand; while quickly providing ways of channelling the inevitable anger and disappointments generated by any sense of failure following all that eludes us, on the other. That anger and resentment must not be too strongly directed against ourselves, for we are meant to keep right on striving; above all, it must be diverted away from the main source of our miseries, those insisting upon the competitive rigours to begin with. Instead, resentment is to be directed downwards and outwards, into contempt for those who are worse off than we are – hence all that we hear about lazy benefit ‘scroungers’, pushy immigrants, threatening foreigners, however shallow and contradictory the message. In Britain, this conservative populism arrives each day for so many with our most popular newspaper, the *Daily Mail* or *Mail on Sunday*, from which, as Anthony Barnett astutely notes, our current Tory Prime Minister, Theresa May, appears to fashion her own daily pronouncements.²³ Surely, one might think, the popularity of this obdurate conservatism suggests that we were indeed simply wrong to keep hoping that another world is possible, and working so hard to convince others of this.

Neoliberal feminism helping women to power?

In Britain, our current Prime Minister, Theresa May (unlike Thatcher), declares herself a feminist, promoting her version of equal opportunities. She cofounded Women2Win in 2005 to help elect more Conservative women to parliament.²⁴ The title itself captures the competitive drive of this new brand of feminism, while echoing the neoliberal zeitgeist of winners and losers. The feminism she espouses is not oppositional, but presented as a firm ally of the capitalist market: ‘If we fully used the skills and qualifications of women who are currently out of work, it could deliver economic benefits of £15billion - 21 billion per year’, May suggests.²⁵ Meanwhile, during her twenty years as an MP, winning a place in the Tory-led Cabinet as one of its few women, May supported all the austerity measures to make the lives of poorer women so much harder. She voted for shifts in benefit payments that move family allowance from mothers back into the pay packets of the major breadwinners in the home, often rendering women more dependent on male partners. This leaves such women further trapped if in

abusive relationships – and this came exactly when support for domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centres have also been cut.²⁶

However, the iconic image of the neoliberal feminist is one best personified by Facebook's chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, who presented what she calls 'a sort of feminist manifesto', but one written to inspire men as well as women. Her bestselling book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013) had an extraordinary impact when released in the United States, jumped instantly to the top of the best-seller list, with Sandberg appearing on every major television talk show, packing out theatres, dominating newspaper commentary, and gracing the cover of *Time* magazine. She thereby ensured that women's ambitions, as well as our supposed lack of them, became a global talking point. A few years earlier, Sandberg had delivered her trail-blazing TED-talk in 2010, 'Why we have too few women leaders', since viewed by almost 7 million people. It was after the impact of her Ted-talk that Sandberg established her team of women and men to encourage *Lean In* circles around the USA and globally, quickly signing up corporations who supported the *Lean In* goal of 'encouraging women to pursue their ambitions'.²⁷ Flagging her feminist credentials, in the book Sandberg admits that women at work face problems of sexism and discrimination, as well as lack of access to maternity leave and child care. Nevertheless, her main agenda addresses what she sees as the problem of women's own internal barriers, those that hamper women's careers through a failure to take risks and be more assertive: 'Compared to our male colleagues fewer of us aspire to senior positions ... My argument is that getting rid of these internal barriers is crucial to gaining power'. Once women are the bosses, she continues, they will 'tear down the external barriers'.²⁸

Who knows, Sandberg may very well be sincere in both wanting to encourage women's ambitions and also hoping to see more women-friendly workplaces, though it requires infinite naiveté, indeed disavowal, surely, not to notice that what she celebrates as a new way forward is occurring just when so many women's situations in the workplace are worsening, becoming ever-more precarious and underpaid. Moreover, there has been little or no change in the situation of the majority of women working within the two hundred corporate and organizational 'partners' that have signed up to support her *Lean In* campaign, which include not only Facebook and Google, but all the major American corporations, Coca-Cola and Pepsico, AT&T, Verizon, Ford and GM, Pfizer and Merck & Co., Walmart and Costco, and all the rest of them. Indeed, as the American investigative journalist Susan Faludi reported from her in-depth research on the emergence of *Lean In* a few years ago, many of the 200 corporations and organizations signing up to support *Lean In*, such as Walmart and Costco, were already fighting sex discrimination cases against them..

Meanwhile Sandberg, with her reported 34 million investment in Facebook, remains the sole woman among its top executives.²⁹ One former Facebook operator Kate Losse, after working in the firm

for five years and becoming the speechwriter for its mega-rich owner, Mark Zuckerberg, has since described Lean's In's strategy as a strictly top-down movement – one 'that ensures greater leverage for those in power'. As she explains, corporations such as Facebook can use feminism to give them cultural and political clout, promoting themselves as global leaders on par with nation states: 'Companies over countries,' as she reports Zuckerberg often saying at meetings, 'If you want to change the world, the best thing to do is start a company.' Feminism can serve these global corporations, at least when reduced to individual aspiration, by presenting itself as on the side of global progress, while persuading women to exploit themselves by working harder and remaining underpaid, all in the name of freedom: 'Don't put on the brakes. Accelerate. Keep your foot on the gas pedal', as Losse describes Sanders continually exhorting women.³⁰

Today some older feminists, including the British sociologist Angela McRobbie, have written of their fears that younger women buy into what she calls the market's 'post-feminism', accepting as liberating the commercial women-friendly brandings of 'empowerment' and 'choice', while seeing no need for building solidarity between women. Thus, in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) McRobbie describes young women donning the sponsored trappings of a sexually liberated 'femininity' as a form of 'post-feminist masquerade', yet one still central to the maintenance of masculine hegemony.³¹ Nevertheless, it seems to me that the 'feminine masquerade' still performed by women, the constant effort to stay slim, fit and attractive, in line with all those media images of the alluringly feminine, is increasingly embroiled with the absolute necessity for most women to find some niche in the paid workforce, hence the promotion and success of the *Lean In* perspective.

In her current writing, McRobbie too stresses the pressure on a woman to locate herself in the workforce, however unrewarding or exploited their positions. This is driven, on the one hand, by contemporary media images of the glamorous, independent woman, the face of successful femininity now resting upon financial autonomy; on the other, by the constant shaming of those seen as reliant on benefits, especially single mothers.³² Encouraging the aspirations of young women therefore plays a key role in the promotion of today's accelerated workplaces, while further entrenching market rationality, with women encouraged to see any job as better than no job, whatever the employment conditions and irrespective of their domestic responsibilities. This helps to create women as ideal 'neoliberal' subjects, with many of them willing to work for less, especially when their wages are essential for the upkeep of children or other dependents.

Whether we call it 'post', 'aspirational', 'choice', 'corporate' or perhaps, along with the astute British philosopher and activist Nina Power, 'oblivious feminism', what we see today is the media's constant promotion of a populist feminism that encourages women to focus simply on themselves, if they are to feel empowered. There is little or no space in any such personalized feminism for earlier feminist

concerns, whether around gender violence, discrimination, childcare issues, or improving the world around us to make it a better place for all.³³ Thus, the young British journalist Dawn Foster notes in *Lean Out*, her strong riposte to Sandberg, the major function of *Lean In* is that it “whitewashes brands and corporations’ complicity in the economic structures that perpetuate inequality”.³⁴ Like her, I find it more accurate to think about the market’s promotion of a superficial feminist jargon than to berate feminists’ actual complicity with corporate market forces in our always unfinished, never adequately inclusive, support for women’s hopes for better lives.

Indeed, in one of the most recent analytic overviews of the corporate rebranding of a form of ‘neoliberal feminism’, American gender scholar Catherine Rottenberg sees the reshaping of feminist discourse as now central in the promotion of market ideologies around the globe, at least in their appeal to middle-class women. Drawing upon the political theorist Wendy Brown’s notion of ‘human capital’, she highlights the extension of market principles into all aspects of our lives. On a person level, we are taught to treat ourselves as though we are all nothing other than individual commodities, tailoring our performances, almost from birth, to appear more desirable for the market. Whether exercising in the gym, attending classes, or busy on social media posting selfies of ourselves looking attractive and happy, people are engaged in a constant process of self-scrutiny and self-presentation. Rottenberg agrees that such pressures are not aimed exclusively at women, though women are addressed in distinct ways. First of all, it is young women in particular who are so closely identified with their physicality and appearance, encouraging an obsessive focus on their bodies, and other people’s reaction to them, which is more likely to ensure not so much liberation as constant anxiety around their appearance. This is certainly manifest nowadays in the still soaring rates of anorexia and depression in young women.³⁵

Moreover, as Rottenberg also highlights, it is precisely women’s traditional roles in child-bearing and care work that is ignored, or seen as undermining, their market value. This means that motherhood must be delayed or domestic work outsourced to others, thereby serving to mute out gender difference in the production of professional subjectivities, while simultaneously generating ‘new forms of racialized and class-stratified gender exploitation’, with the work of caring outsourced to others, deemed more dispensable. It is the sociologist Arlie Hochschild who was one of the first to emphasize increasing role of the personal outsourcing of domestic labour, referring to the expanding ‘series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring’ (2000: 131).³⁶ Moreover, as Rottenberg forecasts, coming into focus on our alarming neoliberal horizon is not just professional women freezing their eggs until the opportune moment for breeding arises, but renting a womb from this new class of disposable women. It all leads her to conclude: ‘Neoliberal feminism is not only shorn of all obligations to less privileged women, it also

makes alternative futures difficult to envision, since it actively and performatively forgets the conditions that naturalize sexual difference, and it leaves us stunned in the face of a fading lexicon of critique'.³⁷

It is this powerful critique that highlights the importance of our continuing need as feminists to reassess and re-launch ourselves as a force of resistance, asserting our opposition to the neoliberal reworking of women's hopes for better lives. Have women been 'simply losing' over the last decade, challenging us to wonder whether all the trouble feminists have made gained anything at all for the majority of women? Of course, we are familiar with one response to this situation from anti-feminists gleefully pointing the finger of blame at feminism itself. As ever, such accusations sometimes come from women themselves and, more recently, even some of the latest self-styled feminists, blaming their more radical 'sisters' for worsening women's situation: either because of our talk of sexism and women's special needs is seen as counterproductive; or else because we are accused of enabling men to evade their former sense of 'responsibility' for assisting women. Illustratively, both accusations are evident in the instant media space accorded Kim Elsesser's *Sex and the Office* (2015), where the former American banker, now a new sort of feminist and gender expert, argues that the commotion over sexual harassment has backfired on women, making it too risky for men to forge professional friendships with women, while intimidating senior male executives from offering to help women in the workplace out of fear those actions might be misconstrued as sexual harassment.³⁸ In other moments, the very same media smugly scolding feminist radicalism for targeting issues such as the harassment of women rather than encouraging their aspirations earnestly reports not just the continuity in, but the rise of, workplace harassment. At these times, we can read, for instance, about the most recent research undertaken by the Trades Union Congress and Everyday Sexism Project in Britain in 2016, which revealed that that 50 per cent of women report being sexually harassed at work, rising to nearly two thirds for women between 18 and 24.³⁹ [nb: Notice line below and other places in the text, that we are not able to delete!]

Provocative Rebrandings of Feminism

However, as feminists should know only too well by now, any attempt to assess women's shifting situation today, whether for better or worse, needs to be extremely cautious. Generalizations about women's lives overall have become more elusive than ever, unless we pay the closest attention possible to the complex cultural and socio-economic context of particular groups of women, however large or small their number. This is because some women have risen to extraordinary and unprecedented positions of power, just as other women face endless hardship. Indeed, were the recent Presidential election in the U.S.A. to have gone to the contender with the highest number of votes (with Clinton

beating Trump in the popular vote by almost three million) then we would have had a female triumvirate ruling over the major Western democracies: Hilary Clinton, Angela Merkel and Teresa May, with Marine Le Pen, as I write, waiting hopefully. Meanwhile, Michelle Obama emerged as the most popular political figure in the United States at the close of 2016, with a 59 per cent positive vote, compared to her husband's at 51 per cent, and Donald Trump at 29 per cent (Hilary Clinton, scored only 40 per cent).⁴⁰

Moreover, what is perhaps most interesting about this is that three of those formidable political figures, Mrs Clinton, Mrs May and Mrs Obama, have all publicly declared themselves to be feminist, while Merkel announced in 2015 that one of her priorities was 'improving gender inequality in the workplace' (however, she had said two years earlier, perhaps correctly, that if she were to describe herself as a feminist, other feminists might find this 'offensive').⁴¹ Although surrounded by sexism and, in the case of Michelle Obama, a sexism one laced with virulent racism, all four of these female figures are at the very heart of the neoliberal order (or however else we choose to label today's particularly rampant financialised capitalist economy), and hence representative of a type of mainstreaming of feminism. It is a feminism apparently compatible with our political elite, however fiercely resented these women remain in a symbolic world where 'power' is still coded as 'masculine'.

Such mainstreaming of feminism is seen by many people as reflecting the success of the earlier women's liberation movement. In the popular imagination women must have won their liberation, since a small minority have climbed to the very head of the capitalist pack, perhaps helping to give it a more caring, human face. It is this deliberate incorporation of a tamed and truncated feminism into the language of the political elite that compels us today to review its place in the sort of resistance needed to address the chief crises and cruelties of the present. I believe that these particular female leaders are probably sincere in hoping that there will be more opportunities for women, fewer obstacles for them to have to surmount to realize whatever ambitions they have. It is evident when we watch Michelle Obama, for instance, going into schools, wanting to encourage every young woman in the world – but black female children, in particular – to try to succeed just as she has, by working hard enough and dreaming large. Yet individual encouragement alone does little to inspire the forms of collective resistance to all those structures that will stand obdurately in the way of so many young women. The place of a few women in the corridors of power, along with the successful co-option of certain aspects of feminist rhetoric (always with an individualizing twist), must be addressed if feminism is to remain a movement of resistance. This is why it is necessary to return to our histories time and again, when what is oppositional at one moment may look different than at another.

Much the same can be said about the triumphs and losses of all progressive movements. It is evident, for instance, in struggles for sexual freedom, where so many goals have been won across Western democracies, even as discrimination and exclusion lives on. As the Australian sociologist and pioneering HIV/AIDS activist Dennis Altman argues, there has been ‘a smooth blending of sexual freedom and neoliberal economics’, when just over a generation ago many lesbian and gay activists believed ‘social revolution’ was necessary ‘as a precondition for sexual liberation’. Instead, he notes, with consumer capitalism now itself eager to cater to a multiplicity of sexual tastes, it is multinational corporations themselves that are increasingly joining the cause of promoting dissident ‘LGBT’ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual) identities in countries where they remain criminalised or embattled.⁴² Globally, over the last decade in particular, companies openly championing LGBT rights, such as Starbucks and Adidas, have reaped benefits from that move, finding that their LGBT customers are among the most loyal, with their spending power, overall, thought to be in the region of \$800 billion per year.⁴³ Nevertheless, same-sex relationships do remain criminalised in more than 70 nations, with no workplace protection from discrimination in half the countries of the world, while 50 per cent of LGBT youth report experiences of school bullying in both the UK and the USA, which helps explain why 40 per cent of homeless youth on the streets of major cities in the USA are said to be LGBT people.⁴⁴ Thus, as Jeffrey Weeks does, it is crucial to remember and celebrate the very real struggles that initiated change in the sexual arena, while also continuing to fight discrimination wherever it occurs.⁴⁵ However, it is now clear that there is nothing inherently oppositional in sexual dissidence, at least not if recognition, acceptance and the pursuit of individual achievement within capitalist societies is the primary struggle.

There has even developed a rebranding of past struggles for sexual rights as an emblem for right-wing politics. Questions concerning sexual rights and politics for sexual minorities have become central in a geopolitical polemic that creates a rhetoric of “us-against-them”. This trend has been conceptualized as *homonationalism* by queer theorist Jasbir K. Puar.⁴⁶ Puar argues that discourses of sexuality and race link up with discourses of nation, militarism, and securitization to produce U.S.-nationalist homosexual subjects as constituted by their rights over and against perversely racialized and racially perverse “terrorist” bodies. The consolidation of this homonormativity travels through Orientalist imaginings of “Muslim sexuality”: the perverse, failed masculinity, the polygamy, and the bestiality of the (always male) terrorist, compounded by the hypothesis of Islamic sexual repression, functions to cast the U.S. as enlightened, secular, and tolerant by sexually othering the targets of the U.S. war machine.

In much of central Europe as well there has developed a pattern of radical right-wing movements using their support for a type of identity-politics as a marker for their exclusionary nationalism.

Accordingly, The Swedish writer and journalist Anna-Maria Sörberg claims in a book soon to be published that gay rights are cast as symbols of a western, urban and progressive trend in society.⁴⁷ The narrative about the victories success of the LGBT-movements has become an important marker in the self-image of the democratic and progressive nature of many Western nations. Sörberg shows how populist right-wing parties in Europe highlight LGBT-rights as essential national values to position themselves in contrast to “the others” – migrants, refugees – and, specially, Muslims.⁴⁸ This tactic can also be observed in Israel. Israeli politicians demonstrate their assumed superiority to their Arab neighbours by public display of a progressive attitude to homosexuals, known as ‘pink-washing’. For instance, gays and lesbians are allowed to serve in the army. Thus, by the beginning of the 21st Century the LGBT-case was appropriated by right-wing politics, which helped foster a new form of exclusionary nationalism and patriotism.⁴⁹

The Western national narrative is nowadays about a national “us” where the struggle for equal rights, sexual rights and anti-discrimination is supposedly won, hiding the reality that there still remains significant conflicts about these matters. Practices that don’t sit comfortably with this story of progress about equality, sexual rights and freedom as a national value, such as violence and sexual harassment of all kinds, is not represented as part of western nations. Conservative and right-wing movements, including Sverigedemokraterna in Sweden, Fremskrittspartiet in Norway, Front National in France and Alternativ für Deutschland in Germany, promote equality and LBBT-rights as markers for their exclusionary nationalism.⁵⁰

At the same time, however,

On the March Again

There have always been conflicts within feminism, nevertheless, despite our differences, what I now realize is that in the heyday of women’s liberation there was always more that united than separated feminists of the 1970s and ’80s. Whatever our blind spots and conflicts relating to the distinct challenges faced by particular groups of women, we were all involved in some sort of *collective* struggle both for radical social equality and also to overturn the symbolic marginalization and routine disparagement of the feminine, which encompassed all things designated or embodied as female. Moreover, the pursuit of self-interest never featured in our language, despite the frictions generated by struggling with the many paradoxes of any identity politics: seeking a narrative to consolidate and broaden a sense of unity between women, while also determined to liberate ourselves from the discrimination and harm that so many women had faced, and often still encountered.

Hence, in my book *Making Trouble* (2007), I wrote about the conflict generated between feminists in relation to women’s differing access to power and cultural inclusion, highlighting issues of race,

ethnicity, class and sexual preference, with their distinct political agendas (nowadays theorized as intersectionality).⁵¹ Disputes also coalesced around images of men and masculinity as inherently oppressive. A decade later, it was the questioning of any secure basis for grounding either gender or sexual identity, accompanying a celebration of the fluidity of desire and the challenge of transgender identities, that was troubling earlier feminist assumptions of the centrality of sexual difference in the queer nineties. Yet, however embattled with each other we had been over our identities and differences when seeking the space to flourish in a still male dominated, capitalist world, we all had an oppositional outlook of some sort. In the meantime, however, the engines of capitalist expansion have always worked to tame and commodify any subversive movement or identity, incorporating opposition into its own ruthless search for profits.

More than ever, it is clear to me today that we need constant reinforcement of all those spontaneous or enduring forms of movement politics, combatting the backlash they always face from those who see their power and profits threatened by resistance, or perhaps those merely clinging to their relative privileges over those in most urgent need of assistance. We know that it is such backlash in the context of the greater immiseration overall that has helped propel a populist right into the heart of government in recent elections, not just in the USA, but also across Europe, India, and no doubt elsewhere. It fed into the Brexit vote in Britain, as many politicians today seek popularity invoking the most regressive forces of racism, misogyny and xenophobia, in what the Indian writer Pankaj Mishra sums up as the ‘counter-democracy of the aggrieved’.⁵²

It is obvious that few things are more important than to encourage all these movements of progressive democratic engagement wherever we can, while always listening out for genuinely silenced voices, trampled not just in the mainstream but also in the inevitable myopias of resistance. Yet political movements have their own pitfalls, which is why it has long been my view that it is equally important to keep seeking out the broadest possible alliances and solidarity, wherever that can be found: however quirky the forms of movement resistance might seem; however moderate or willing to compromise the mainstream political parties that we need to work with, or join, to deliver the most progressive form of government possible.⁵³ The search for some possibility of mainstream political leverage is why those two ageing socialist politicians, Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, into the most unlikely recent beacons for left radicals, attracting both old-timers and, especially, the young.

I also know that the one thing that has not dried up – indeed will never totally disappear, and is certainly on the move again today – is the individual and collective passion for resistance. I have only to open my eyes to the world to notice that the activism of Seventies’ feminism is far from buried, even while delighting in the young female firebrands now making trouble all around me. They came together

with others the day after Donald Trump's inauguration to join the millions of women around the world objecting to everything that he stood for, above all his racism, misogyny and baseless promises of protecting American 'workers' from those who have undermined their livelihoods. It felt clear on that day that women have not all been swallowed wholesale by the promises and frustrations of consumer subjugation, or personal self-monitoring, however potent these forces.

In *Making Trouble* I argued that democratic engagement, equality, solidarity, care and commitment were the values that the second-wave feminists I knew once tried – falteringly – to live by. They could hardly be more at odds with the personal aspiration, individualised competition and ubiquitous subservience to corporate market interests that is the regulating principle of the times we occupy. Corporations certainly have a great desire to harness feminist energy for their own interests, although I don't believe that feminism itself played any significant role in creating today's ubiquitous corporate culture. Overall, I now welcome feminist concern with breaking through the barriers that have traditionally excluded women from positions of power, as well with combating the distinct difficulties faced by women who nowadays make it to the very top. Nevertheless, I would encourage a necessary scepticism towards the emergence of any form of career or corporate feminism that does *not* extend its focus to include the very evident and ongoing worsening situation of the majority of women today, which is often the product of the neoliberal climate that encourages, if not enforces, their entry into injurious working practices that ignore their situations outside the workplace.

Feminists undoubtedly face bleak times ahead. Yet what is genuinely exciting about this moment is that despite, and also because of, all our shared anxieties at the election of a demagogic, reactionary populist as the leader of the self-styled 'free-world', and the xenophobia and racism that has been growing in much of the world, I also sense a greater engagement in politics than has occurred for quite some time. It is the awareness of our own feminist history that can help forestall women's complicity with a neoliberal climate that is so harmful for the majority of women. It can hopefully also encourage feminists of all ages and varieties to resist the inequalities and violence of the present, insisting upon the paramount significance of the nurturing of people and the sustainability of life overall.

I am grateful to Wencke Mühleisen for suggestions for my essay presented in this collection.

¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, communication on Facebook, posted December 19, 2016 at 2:35pm.

² Fraser N (2009) 'Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History' *New Left Review* 56 March-April.

³ See the chapter in this book “Authoritarian Organizational Imageries for Human Evolution”, in which Agnes Bolsø and Wencke Mühleisen discuss the elitist and authoritarian tendencies in a selection of future scenarios against the backdrop of apocalyptic feelings of multiple crisis.

⁴ Tom Crewe, *The Strange Death of Municipal England*, *London Review of Books*, vol 38, no.34, pp. 6-10p. 15 December 2016, p. 7.

⁵ Drew Milne: *The Jargon of Neoliberalism*, *Wildcat Dispatches*, 28 November, 2016, <http://wildcatdispatches.org/2016/11/28/drew-milne-the-jargon-of-neoliberalism/downloaded> 12.12.16.

⁶For further evidence of and discussions of these arguments around soaring inequality see Andrew Sayer, *Why we can't afford the rich*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2015; Andrew Gamble, *Crisis Without End?: The Unravelling of Western Prosperity*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, especially pp.3-5; David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*, London, Profile Books, 2010; Richard Seymour, *Against Austerity*, London, Pluto Press, 2014

⁷ Simon Rogers, ‘How Britain changed under Margaret Thatcher. In 15 charts’, *The Guardian*, 8 April, 2013,

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I discuss Thatcher’s legacy at length in, Lynne Segal, ‘Thatcher’s legacy: Thinking psychosocially, across the decades’, *Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations*, Volume 20, 2014, issue 1: pp.8-19.

⁸ Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) is discussed extensively in Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*. Daniel Stedman Jones, New Jersey, Princeton, 2012.

⁹ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* [1993], London, Hapter Collins, 2013, p.5, p.8, p.93.

¹⁰ Paul Johnson, ‘Failure of the Feminists’, *The Spectator*, 12 March 2011, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/6766663/failure-of-the-feminists/>

¹¹ I discuss Thatcher’s legacy at length in, Lynne Segal, ‘Thatcher’s legacy: Thinking psychosocially, across the decades’, *Psychodynamic Practice: Individuals, Groups and Organisations*, Volume 20, 2014, issue 1: pp.8-19.

¹² Dave Gordon, Ruth Levitas, Christina Pantazis, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain: The Millennium Survey*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006.

¹³ Catherine Rottenberg, ‘Neoliberal Feminism and the Future of Human Capital’, *Signs*, Winter, 2017, pp.1-20 ; Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, forthcoming.

¹⁴ See by Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths*, London, Anthem Press, 2015, p.15.

¹⁵Phillip Inman, UK’s austerity welfare spending is closer to poorest nations of EU, 21 December 2016,

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¹⁶ Colin Leys, ‘How the left can win in Britain’, *Open Democracy UK*, 13 June 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/colin-leys/how-left-can-win-in-britain>, accessed

8.1.17; see also Leys, *Total Capitalism: Market Politics, Market State*, London, Merlin Press, 2008.

¹⁷ Jordan Shilton, 'UK: The Wealth of the Super-Rich has Doubled Since the 2008 Economic Crisis', *Global Research*, May, 2014, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/uk-the-wealth-of-the-super-rich-has-doubled-since-the-2008-economic-crisis/5383121>

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²² Donna Baines, Sara Charlesworth, Tamara Daly, 'Underpaid, unpaid, unseen, unheard and unhappy? Care work in the context of constraint', *Journal of Industrial of Industrial Relations*, 2016, vol.58, no.4, 449-454.

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²⁶ 'How Theresa May voted on Social Issues', https://www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/10426/theresa_may/maidenhead/votes, accessed 14 February, 2017.

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²⁹ Susan Faludi, 'Facebook Feminism, Like It or Not', *The Baffler* No. 23, 2013, <http://thebaffler.com/salvos/facebook-feminism-like-it-or-not>;

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³¹ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Sage Publications, 2009, p. 135; p.67.

³² Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015.

³³ Nina Power, Introduction to Dawn Foster, *Lean Out*, Repeater Books, 2015, p.7.

³⁴ Foster, *ibid.* p.56. As Foster suggests in her own *Lean Out*, we can compare this new form of corporate career feminism with the 'pink-washing' that has been used by other countries, in particular Israel, in that case using their support for gay and lesbian rights as a sign of their own democratic inclusiveness, while at the same time involved in the most widespread suppression of Palestinian civil rights, along with military occupation and seizure of Palestinian land, p.59.

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⁴⁰ Carrie Dann, 'Poll: Majority of Americans Pessimistic or Uncertain About Trump Presidency', NBC News, December, 19 2016,

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⁴² Dennis Altman, 'Is the Personal still Political?', *Meanjin*, Summer, 2016, p.42; p.46. See also Altman, *The End of the Homosexual?*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press,

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⁴⁴ Antonio Zapulla, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007.

⁴⁶ Jasbir K. Puar, K. (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Duke University press, 2010

⁴⁷ <http://www.leopardforlag.se/bok/de-civiliserade/>

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