

## The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism by Catherine Rottenberg

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### *Book Review*

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The book under review, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* by Catherine Rottenberg, explores the resurgence of feminist agenda in United States. In the book Rottenberg succinctly challenges the image of teleological progress of feminist movements which had proliferated the media in United States, pre-election. She tracks the “mutual entanglement of feminism with neoliberalism” through mainstream outlets like newspaper articles, bestselling autobiographies, television series etc. She argues that the popular discourse marks a shift in the feminist vocabulary, whereby debates on equal rights, liberation and social justice were replaced by words such as happiness, balance and responsibility. It is this neoliberal feminist turn, its underlying logic and its “intricate mechanisms” that form the basis of Rottenberg’s book. Throughout the book Rottenberg maintains that at the heart of the neoliberal feminist narrative is the notion of “work-family balance”, where women should be able to have a successful career and a satisfying family life. It not only discursively constructs a “happy work–family balance” as a commonsensical feminist ideal, but makes her individually responsible for attaining this ideal. This is specifically interesting as generally emancipation for women had been seen as freedom from domesticity. The manner in which the so called “equilibrium” between work and family undermines the potent feminist challenge to the structural inequalities emanent in both the public and the private realm form the core of her work. Further, she argues that the balanced life ideal, almost inevitably produces its other, the domestic and care workers, who are exploitable and disposable. In the first chapter, the author examines Annie-Marrie Slaughter’s article “Why Woman Can’t Have It All” along with television series like “The Good Wife”. Through the analysis, she contests that the narrative establishes the “equilibrium between the private and public aspect of the life” as a feminist goal. It advocates for certain modifications in the public domain (the workplace) to accommodate the demand of the “imperative” maternal instincts. Rottenberg asserts that such theorization of the feminist subject obliterates the long drawn struggle of feminist movement which insisted that the “personal is political” as in this discursive shift the bifurcation remains intact. She argues that this notion of a work-family balance is essential to sustain the gendered division of labour upon

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which liberalism is constituted. Drawing from Wendy Brown's feminist critique of liberalism, Rottenberg contends that liberalism is "dependent" on the split of the public as autonomous sphere (*read male*) and private as a domain for the encumbered (*read female*). Hence, the idea of an emancipated woman is a contradiction in the liberal discourse. Consequently, the invention of the balanced woman, she concludes, is a way to disavow the gendered liberal construction of space.

The author then moves on to another "feminist manifesto" *Lean in* by Sheryl Sandberg. She avers that though the work of Slaughter is seen as antithetic to Sandberg's book, both works are emblematic of a continuum in the cultural shift in mainstream feminism to institute work-family balance as a feminist ideal. *Lean in* emphasizes that a woman can only achieve the felicitous and happy work-family balance if she "values her own professional development". Further, the book puts the burden on the woman to carve out the perfect balance for herself through cost benefit analysis. However, to have a satisfying professional career the woman has to "internalize the revolution", "lean in" in their careers and push themselves forward towards their professional goals. Rottenberg asserts that the discussion in the book completely erases the structural inequality in public spaces and constitutes a feminist subject which demands nothing from State or other institutions. She maintains that Sandberg's slogan of internalizing the revolution is based on the assumption that the revolution has already occurred and it is only the woman's internal barrier that is the obstacle. This "interiorized" subject, the author claims, is a break from the liberal feminist subject who used to challenge the gendered exclusions of universal principles and institutions. Further, this subject is not just individualized but entrepreneurial, who would be oriented to "optimize her resources". This would require constant self-monitoring and becomes a form of governmentality where the subject is embedded in market rationality. Questions of social justice and collective efforts to correct historical injustices becomes subservient to the logic of market, thus, entrenching neoliberalism as a dominant mode of governance.

In the next chapter she adds another layer to the above mentioned analysis of the change in the register of mainstream feminism. She states that neoliberalism not only inscribes the balance woman as a feminist utopia for the present but posits it as a normative framework for future. Through glorification of hook up culture and the new technology of egg freezing, neoliberal feminism encourages upwardly mobile middle class women to invest in profession first and postpone pregnancy for a later time. Rottenberg eloquently argues that the promise of fulfilling future (work-family balance) transforms the gendered subject into generic human capital and

the responsibility of reproduction “squarely falls on the shoulder of individual woman”. Creation of an individuated human capital disavows the gendered division of labor and converts even the most private aspects of life into capital. She demonstrates the continuum in the discourse of neoliberal feminism through “mommy blogs” in fourth chapter.

The fifth chapter examines another feminist manifesto *Women Who Work* by Ivanka Trump. Further by juxtaposing Trump’s book with other books written by women whose political leaning are different than her, Rottenberg delineates the manner in which neoliberal rationalities penetrates all the writings. She asserts that the manifestoes through exhortations about “self-investment” transform the female subject not only as a human capital but also produces a self that is a “business enterprise, where all activities and practices are understood as investments that aim to appreciate the value of the self as firm.” Rottenberg brilliantly shows such a discourse helps mold all spheres of life into a model of market where “boosting one’s productivity” both in public and private realm becomes a feminist objective.

In the ultimate chapter the author exposes the dark side of the “have it all” feminism. She avers that most of the women who are able to cultivate a balance between a demanding career and children are dependent on some help (mostly immigrant woman or women of color) to pull it off. However, this outsourcing of child care is elided in the popular narrative of *woman who work*. Rottenberg illustrates that the underpaid and exploitative working conditions of these women are often invisibilized under neoliberalism thus intensifying the glaring gap between the haves and have nots. She argues that neoliberal feminist manifestoes valorize individual success and undermines the guarantee of social justice which has adverse effect on the less privileged women. Finally, Rottenberg outlines the path for “reclaiming feminism”, through Judith Butler’s recent work on precarity. She affirms that grounding feminist politics in and against the notion of precarity would bring together several groups struggling for social justice as precariousness can be caused by many diverse processes.

*The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* is an important and timely contribution to the scholarship on contemporary feminism and goes a long way to unpack the nuances of increasingly hegemonic neoliberal feminist discourse that operate to shape the desires of upwardly mobile middle class women and thus constructing new subjectivities. It is a captivating account of the advent and impact of neoliberal govern mentality, which is accessible to anyone interested in cultural and gender studies and beyond.