

ARTICLE

Feminism and Neoliberal Governmentality

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ABSTRACT: The article investigates the consequences for feminist politics of the neoliberal turn. Feminist scholars have analysed the political changes in the situation of women that have been brought about by neoliberalism, but their assessments of neoliberalism's consequences for feminist theory and politics vary. Feminist thinkers such as Hester Eisenstein and Sylvia Walby have argued that feminism must now return its focus to socialist politics and foreground economic questions of redistribution in order to combat the hegemony of neoliberalism. Some have further identified post-structuralism and its dominance in feminist scholarship as being responsible for the debilitating move away from socialist or Marxist paradigms. I share their diagnosis to the extent that it is my contention that the rapid neoliberalization characterising the last thirty years has put women and feminist thought in a completely new political situation. However, in contrast to those feminist thinkers who put the blame for the current impasse on the rise of poststructuralist modes of thought, it is my contention that the poststructuralist turn in feminist theory in the 1980s and 1990s continues to represent an important theoretical advance. I will discuss Foucault's genealogy of neoliberalism in order to assess the ways it can contribute to feminist theory and politics today. I contend that Foucault can provide a critical diagnostic framework for feminist theory as well as for prompting new feminist political responses to the spread and dominance of neoliberalism. I will also return to Nancy Fraser and Judith's Butler's seminal debate on feminist politics in the journal *Social Text* (1997) in order to demonstrate that a critical analysis of the economic/cultural distinction must be central when we consider feminist forms of resistance to neoliberalism.

Keywords: Feminism, neoliberal governmentality, socialism, feminist subject.

Feminist scholars have analysed extensively the changes in the situation of women that have been brought about by the global neoliberal turn over the last three or four decades, but their assessments of neoliberalism's impact on feminist theory and politics vary. Some have argued that feminism must return its focus to socialist politics and foreground economic questions of redistribution in order to combat the hegemony of neoliberalism.¹ Some have further identi-

¹ See e.g. Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced. How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009); Sylvia Walby, *The Future of Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

fied poststructuralism and its dominance in feminist scholarship as responsible for the debilitating move away from socialist or Marxist paradigms.² A weaker version of this critique claims that poststructuralist approaches are inadequate to the task of confronting new realities brought about by neoliberalism. The stronger version claims that poststructuralist feminism is symptomatic of, or even partially responsible for, this neoliberal configuration. Hester Eisenstein³, for example, has argued that the postmodern turn in women's studies scholarship in the 1980s, with its emphasis on discourse and its distrust of grand narratives, undermined a systematic analysis of the capitalist system. The contemporaneous global rise of neoliberalism as the leading political and economic paradigm implies that feminism must now turn away from poststructuralist and postmodern analyses that focus on individual acts of resistance and back toward a structural analysis of global capitalism.

I share this diagnosis to the extent that the rapid neoliberalization, which has characterized the last thirty years, has put women and feminist thought in a completely new political situation. However, in contrast to feminist thinkers who put the blame for the current impasse on the rise of poststructuralist modes of thought in feminist theory and advocate a return to socialist feminism, I contend that such return represents a dangerous nostalgia that would rob feminist theory of its remaining political relevance. It is my contention that the poststructuralist turn in feminist theory in the 1980s and 1990s was an important advance, only now its theoretical and political force has to be redirected to new issues such as neoliberalism and globalization. My argument is that Foucault's thought provides a more nuanced diagnostic approach to neoliberalism than traditional socialist welfare feminism, because it enables us to account for neoliberalism's constitutive effects. These effects include both new forms of the subject as well as new limitations on what are understood as viable and rational political options in today's society. In addition, I will show how a Foucauldian approach to neoliberalism exposes the political constitution of the economic domain itself for critical scrutiny.

Foucault's lectures on neoliberalism delivered at the *Collège de France* in 1979 offer a novel conceptual and theoretical framework for the critical analysis of neoliberalism, but they have received surprisingly little attention from feminist thinkers.⁴ The level on which Foucault operates is distinctive: his genealogical analysis of neoliberal governmentality is not an attempt to provide a causal, historical explanation for the neoliberal turn.⁵ Rather, he seeks to outline the

² See e.g. Eisenstein.

³ Eisenstein, 2; 212-13.

⁴ In French in 2004, *Naissance de la Biopolitique*, and in English in 2008, *The Birth of Biopolitics*. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79*, edited by Michel Senellart (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). Hereafter *The Birth of Biopolitics* is referred to as *BB*.

⁵ For such accounts, see e.g. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Heikki Patomäki, *The Political Economy of Global Security: War, Future Crisis and Changes in Global Governance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008). Heikki Patomäki emphasizes the importance of the closing of the gold window by Nixon in 1970. (Patomäki, 135-136) According to him, this decision to delink the dollar and gold was one of the nodal points that generated a new set of global competitive trends that point forty years later to an immanent rupture in global history.

historical ontology of neoliberalism—the development of a new neoliberal organization of the social realm—thereby showing the way that neoliberal policies are rooted in deep, historical changes in our conception of the political and the practices of governing.⁶ His usage of neoliberalism in these lectures is non-standard from the current point of view, because he traces its earliest form to 1930s Germany. The lectures analyze the neoliberal programme in two forms. The initial German form was represented by proponents of the Freiburg school of economists such as Walter Eucken and Wilhelm Röpke, and the other, American form was the neoliberalism of the Chicago school, which was derived from the former, but was in some respects more radical. In these lectures neoliberalism is crucially treated as a form of governmentality, a rationality of governance that produces new kinds of political subjects and a new organization of the social realm. It is not reducible to a set of economic policies such as limiting the regulation of capital, maximizing corporate profits, and dismantling the welfare state. As a form of governmentality neoliberalism extends beyond economic policy, or even the economic domain as traditionally conceived. A fundamental feature of neoliberal governmentality is not just the eradication of market regulation, for example, but the eradication of the border between the social and the economic: market rationality—cost-benefit calculation—must be extended and disseminated to all institutions and social practices.

I will show that this framework is vital for the feminist diagnosis of our contemporary political reality. I proceed in four stages. In the first two sections I will discuss some recent socialist feminist responses to neoliberalism and criticize their reductive treatment of it as a set of economic policies with undesirable consequences for the welfare of women. I attempt to show that despite their critical intent they fail to address neoliberalism's underlying political rationality and thus overlook its constitutive effects. In the third section I return to Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler's seminal debate on feminist politics in the journal *Social Text* in 1997 in order to demonstrate that a critical analysis of the economic/cultural-distinction must be central when we consider feminist forms of resistance against neoliberalism. In the final section, I discuss Foucault's genealogy of neoliberalism in more detail. I contend that it can provide a critical diagnostic framework for feminist theory as well as opening up new feminist political responses to the spread and dominance of neoliberalism.

It should be noted at the outset that my analysis of neoliberalism here is limited to Europe and North-America, in other words a limited number of Western liberal capitalist countries that have been through significant economic restructuring along neoliberal lines over the last three or four decades. The full impact of the neoliberal turn has been global and it has been convincingly argued by others that its most far-reaching and detrimental effects have in fact been borne by the women in developing countries.⁷ A global analysis of neoliberalism is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, however.

⁶ On Foucault's politicization of ontology, see Johanna Oksala, "Foucault's Politicization of Ontology," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 43 (2010), 445-466.

⁷ On the global effects of neoliberalism see e.g. Alison M. Jaggar, "Saving Amina: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue," *Ethics & International Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2006), 55-75; Eisenstein; Nancy Fraser, "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History," *New Left Review*, 56 (2009), 97-117.

Feminism, Social Democracy, and Neoliberalism

Feminist researchers critical of neoliberalism have sought to demonstrate that its advancement has largely taken place at the expense of women. Sylvia Walby, for example, argues in her recent book *The Future of Feminism* that the rise of neoliberalism and the issues accompanying it—increased economic inequalities, de-democratisation and environmental crisis—create the biggest challenge for the future of feminism.⁸ She argues that the effects of neoliberalism are gendered in two ways. First, the negative impact of neoliberal policies is borne disproportionately by women. Women’s jobs are most affected by cut-backs in public expenditure as they work more often in the public sector. The lack of social services and benefits further affects women more than men, since they are poorer and more dependent on those services.⁹ Second, Walby argues that the rise of neoliberalism has turned the political context in which feminism has to operate more hostile to the practical achievement of its goals. The decline of trade unions has meant that there are fewer allies with whom feminists can construct coalitions, and the lack of funding for public institutions has hindered the active promotion of gender equality initiatives.¹⁰ Neoliberalism brings about social, economic and political changes that “increase gender inequality directly, through their disproportionate impact on women’s jobs and welfare, as well as creating a less hospitable political context for women’s effective engagement in the public sphere and for innovative gender policies.”¹¹ The political remedy to the situation that Walby recommends is the traditional defence of the welfare state—some variant of socialist politics combined with feminist awareness. Walby sees feminism and social democratic politics as necessarily overlapping: feminism has an important contribution to make to social democratic projects and vice versa since they have a shared concern for the democratic regulation of the economy.¹²

Hester Eisenstein argues similarly in *Feminism Seduced* that neoliberalism has had disastrous effects on the lives of most women.¹³ While some women with higher education have succeeded in climbing the corporate ladder, reaching near parity with men in many sectors of work, women with no access to education or childcare are increasingly pushed to part-time and temporary jobs with few benefits. The willingness of women to enter the workforce in massive numbers has traditionally served the interest of capital in holding wages down. The new, neoliberal economy built on temporary low-wage jobs—the so called McJobs—draws even more heavily on female labour, however.¹⁴ Eisenstein argues that these structural changes in the nature of work pose a challenge to mainstream liberal feminism, which sees economic independence as a key to women’s empowerment. Instead of the values of individualism and self-determination characterising liberal feminism we must return to the ideals of collectivism and

⁸ Walby.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹² *Ibid.*, 123.

¹³ Eisenstein.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107-9.

solidarity animating socialist feminism. We need a more class-conscious approach to feminist politics.¹⁵

My aim here is not to challenge the validity of Walby's and Eisenstein's assessments of the implications of the neoliberal turn on women or to deny that the implementation of socialist policies would remedy many of its problematic effects. However, I want to insist that the political challenge that neoliberalism presents to feminism calls for political measures and theoretical interventions that go beyond traditional socialist welfare policies.

Walby opposes neoliberalism to social democracy and argues that the US adopts a neoliberal form in both gender and class regimes, while the EU adopts a relatively more social democratic form.¹⁶ However, neoliberal policies and economic principles have been adopted systematically also by the EU and sometimes their application has been even more consistent than in the US. It is my contention that the idea that gender and class regimes come in two opposing types, neoliberal and social-democratic is an oversimplified abstraction that does not bring either theoretical clarity or political efficacy to feminist analyses. Rather than being opposites, I suggest that we follow Foucault in seeing social-democracy and neoliberalism more fundamentally as representing two variants of the same governmental rationality.

What makes Foucault's philosophical interpretation of neoliberalism particularly helpful, in my view, is his critical analysis of it, not as an ideology, economic doctrine or political regime, but as a specific, rationally reflected and coordinated way of governing: a form of liberal governmental rationality or governmentality. Neoliberalism and the state cannot be understood as simply antithetical to each other when they are understood to combine in the form of a rationally coordinated set of governmental practices. This shift of perspective to neoliberal governmentality enables Foucault to make the provocative claim that although liberal governmentality existed, socialist governmentality did not. The socialist welfare politics dominant in Europe after World War II until the neoliberal turn in the 1970s, had to operate within the dominant framework of liberal governmentality that had been developing and spreading since the 18th century. According to him, socialism has had to submit to liberal governmental rationality and assume the role of merely compensating for the harmful social effects of the free market. In other words, socialism has been forced to take the form of covert or unawoved liberalism.

There is no governmental rationality of socialism. In actual fact, and history has shown this, socialism can only be implemented connected up to diverse types of governmentality. It has been connected up to liberal governmentality, and then socialism and its forms of rationality function as a counter-weight, as a corrective, and a palliative to internal dangers.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 212-13.

¹⁶ Walby, 159.

¹⁷ Foucault, *BB*, 92.

It is important to take Foucault's provocation seriously. His genealogy of neoliberalism shows that the roots of the neoliberal turn lie much deeper than is commonly thought—they lie in the birth of a new liberal form of governmental reason formulated, reflected upon and outlined in the middle of the 18th century and expressed in political economy. Foucault's key claim is that our modern understanding and practice of liberal governance was constituted and limited by a new regime of truth; one which established a novel relationship between political power and economic knowledge. To sum up its essential features, it became possible, for the first time in history, to make scientific truth claims about the economy. Economical thinking was no longer concerned with justice—the sovereign's right to impose restrictions on trade or the fairness of the market, for example—but with truth. The new science of economics dictated that good government should not interfere with market mechanisms which spontaneously followed their own autonomous laws and established their own truths. Because market mechanisms—Adam Smith's invisible hand—best ensured that the pursuit of private interests spontaneously led to the common good, it was irrational to place such pursuits under political control. Economic truths could not be argued against politically without falling into irrationality. This meant that once something was defined as an economic question—such as the magnitude of the income gap between the rich and the poor, for example—it was moved out of the realm of justice to the realm of truth.

Foucault also emphasises that all forms of modern politics have become intertwined with biopolitical concerns—the maximal welfare of the population. In modernity, the people has come to be understood as a population with quantifiable biological properties and good governance means securing the population's maximal health and longevity. The unquestioned objective of good government has become to provide the best possible care of life by the means of economic growth: in a capitalist economic system it is generally accepted that only economic growth, a continuous increase in productivity, can deliver higher living standards for everybody and thus ensure the best life. A stable capitalist economic order, both in its neoliberal or social democratic variants, is understood to be structurally reliant on economic growth. This equation of good government with economic growth is a distinctly modern construction: GDP growth (gross domestic product) is the single most important goal of governments across the world today.

Hence, the spread of neoliberalism has been almost impossible to stop in our current governmentality according to which economic progress, defined as GDP growth, is the unquestioned political end of good government and politically neutral economics truths are understood as the essential means for achieving it. The neoliberal economic argument has simply won in this governmental game of truth: according to neoliberals, economic growth can be best achieved via free international trade, sound budgets—meaning normally fiscal austerity, which translates into cuts in welfare spending—low inflation, privatization, and the deregulation of markets. In such economic thinking commodification and privatization, for example, are understood as particularly effective means of speeding up growth given that GDP is measured in terms of market transactions. If previously non-commercial or public services, cultural products, life forms, physical space and social relation are redefined as private commodities, it

clearly follows that more market transactions will be generated. And formally, this translates into further economic growth measured in terms of GDP.¹⁸ In other words, the rise of neoliberalism has meant that whereas the policies for achieving economic growth have dramatically changed, the biopolitical end of maximal wealth and welfare of the population has remained the same.

The socialist critics of neoliberalism are undoubtedly right in demonstrating that its rise has been contemporaneous with the dramatic increase of the wealth of the elites. Since the global neoliberal turn in the 1970s, there has been an enormous spiralling of the levels of wealth in the top income categories. This new distribution of wealth is often presented as the primary aim of the neoliberal turn by its socialist critics: the neoliberal project has been a deliberate attempt to restore the power and the wealth of the upper classes.¹⁹ However, the models of resistance to neoliberalism become more complicated if we accept that the aim of neoliberal government is to maximize everybody's material welfare, not just the welfare of the elite: as the popular slogan states, the rising tide lifts all boats. The growing disparities of wealth are then understood as the unfortunate, but inevitable consequence of neoliberal government and not as its conspiratorial aim. Against this background, the continuing crisis of the left can be attributed to the fact that supporting welfare capitalism—the welfare of all in a capitalist society—is not its distinctive political demand. Most neoliberals support this end too, but in addition they have succeeded in presenting the winning economic argument for the best means of achieving it. Since the end of the 1970s the left has repeatedly lost in the economic debates centred on the key question of economic growth. It has been forced to either accept “hard economic facts” or to back up its political demands with moral arguments—arguments that have appeared as misplaced compassion for those failing to give their lives proper entrepreneurial shape.²⁰ As William Connolly²¹ formulates the conundrum, the welfare state needs a growing economy to support its distributive programs, but the structure of the capitalist economy is such that growth can only be achieved by policies that are inconsistent with the principles of justice that underlie those programs.

Feminist analyses such as Walby's and Eisenstein's that focus mainly on the material welfare of women—their employment and social benefits, for example—thus have a hard task of showing that the neoliberal reforms are detrimental to women as long as they too engage in this debate in economic terms. In such essentially economic debate, it is by no means obvious

¹⁸ Cf. Patomäki, 163.

¹⁹ David Harvey (Harvey, 21), for example, has presented the powerful argument showing that it was the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful sounding words such as freedom, liberty, choice, and rights to hide the grim realities of this restoration of naked class power. For Harvey, resistance to neoliberalism requires that we rejuvenate class politics and unmask the truth: we must expose neoliberalism for what it truly is, namely a covert attempt to restore class privilege.

²⁰ See Wendy Brown, *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 56.

²¹ William Connolly, “The Dilemma of Legitimacy,” in *Legitimacy and the State*, edited by William Connolly (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 227-31.

that feminist and socialist politics necessarily overlap or that the welfare of women is best served by socialist politics. If welfare programs and feminist initiatives—such as women’s shelters and rape prevention campaigns—can only be funded by a growing economy, and economic facts indicate that the growth of the economy is only possible by the implementation of neoliberal policies, then women’s welfare and neoliberalism are not so obviously opposed anymore.²² We have to either come up with better economic arguments showing how economic growth can be achieved by other means—a task that I will have to leave to trained economists—or, as feminist philosophers, we have to target our current governmentality, according to which economic truths are politically neutral and the good life of the population is essentially dependent on economic growth (defined in terms of GDP). Resistance to neoliberal governmentality then means posing difficult philosophical questions such as: What is the epistemological status of economic truths? Are they value-neutral? What are their political effects? Are our current criteria for economic progress and human welfare adequate? Is economic growth a socially and ecologically sustainable goal?

The Feminist Subject

Another key issue that points beyond traditional socialist welfare politics concerns the feminist subject. A Foucauldian approach shows that the impact of neoliberalism is not limited to the dismantling of the welfare state: as a form of governmentality neoliberalism is constitutive of our conceptions of politics and political action, but also of ourselves as political subjects. This implies that the feminist subject too, as well as our understanding of feminist politics, are shaped and constituted by our current neoliberal governmentality. “Women,” “feminism,” and “feminist politics” are not natural, apolitical entities that are simply affected by certain, empirical changes in society. They are fundamentally shaped and constituted by these changes as well as our conceptions and background beliefs about the social world. Assessing the impact of neoliberal governmentality requires rethinking how our conceptions of female subjectivity, citizenship, political action and feminist liberation, for example, have themselves changed due to the impact of neoliberal hegemony.

From a Foucauldian perspective, both Walby’s and Eisenstein’s analyses are problematic in assuming that the constitution of the (socialist) feminist subject is unaffected by intensified neoliberal technologies of power. If we accept Foucault’s key insight that the constitution of the subject is a thoroughly historical and highly precarious process, this means that it is possible to detect changes in it even in the course of such relative short periods of time as the last twenty or thirty years. I want to suggest that the spread and intensification of neoliberal governmentality has meant that women too have come to be seen, and to see themselves, increasingly as neoliberal subjects—egoistical subjects of interest making free choices based on rational economic calculation. Women do not only want a happy home any more, they too want money, power and success. They are atomic, autonomous subjects of interest competing for the economic opportunities available.

²² Walby’s own socialist feminist analysis emphasises the importance of such central neoliberal objectives as economic growth and the need to increase women’s human capital. (Walby, 152)

The rise of this new feminine, neoliberal subject can be described and documented in different ways—by analysing visual culture or sociological data, for example. The sociologist Angela McRobbie²³, for example, has combined elements of feminist sociology with cultural studies in a provocative attempt to map out the field of post-feminist popular and political culture, mainly within a UK framework. She surveys changes in film, television, popular culture and women's magazines and demonstrates how feminist content has disappeared from them in the last decades and has been replaced by aggressive individualism, by hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality, and by obsession with consumer culture. Natasha Walters' *The New Feminism*²⁴ and Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs*²⁵—two popular books targeting mainly wide, mainstream audience—document this same shift in cultural attitudes. Walters' book articulates ideas about femininity and feminism that became dominant in the UK during the course of 1980s and 1990s and it tells a triumphant story of women's economic success. Walters insists that a woman can be a feminist and still have a white wedding, buy pornography, wear designer clothes or even be a prostitute or a porn star as long as that has been her own choice. In other words, it is irrelevant how women speak, dress, or express sexuality as long as they are pursuing their own interests. For her, the real issues of feminism are about personal freedom, economic independence and professional success in all areas of employment.²⁶ In a more critical vein Levy describes the way that the increasing *pornofication* of all aspects of everyday life is no longer understood in opposition to feminist political aims, but is instead seen as evidence that feminism has already achieved its goals. The fact that women too read *Playboy* and get Brazilian bikini waxes is increasingly understood as a sign of their liberation and empowerment.

My argument here concerning the rise of the neoliberal feminine subject is not empirical, but essentially philosophical, however. This means that although it can be illustrated with empirical facts and descriptions, it cannot, by definition, be conclusively proved or disproved with them. It is premised on Foucault's best-known contribution to feminist theory, namely his philosophical insight that any analysis of power relations must recognize how these relations are constitutive of the subjects involved in them. Power cannot be conceived of as an external relation that takes place between pre-constituted subjects, but has to be understood as constituting the subjects themselves: their constitution only becomes possible in the shifting, contested and precarious field of power relations. This insight must continue to remain central when we try to understand and evaluate the impact of neoliberalism on feminist theory and politics. If we accept that neoliberal techniques of governing have come to increasingly characterize our society, and we also accept that there is an ineliminable tie between forms of power and forms of the subject, then it must follow that the neoliberal turn concerning techniques of governing has necessitated a change in the corresponding construction of the subject.

²³ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism. Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009).

²⁴ Natasha Walters, *The New Feminism* (London: Virago Press, 1998).

²⁵ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs. Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

²⁶ Walters, 193.

As several commentators have emphasized, Foucault theorizes neoliberal governmentality as a particular mode of producing subjectivity: neoliberal governmentality produces subjects who act as individual entrepreneurs across all dimensions of their lives.²⁷ Governable subjects are understood as self-interested and rational beings who will navigate the social realm by constantly making rational choices based on economic knowledge and the strict calculation of the necessary costs and desired benefits. They are atomic individuals whose natural self-interest and tendency to compete must be fostered and enhanced. Under neoliberal governmentality society thus becomes a game in which self-interested, atomic individuals compete for maximal economic returns. As Foucault notes,

The individual's life must be lodged, not within the framework of a big enterprise such as the firm or... the state, but within the framework of a multiplicity of diverse enterprises connected up to and entangled with each other... And finally, the individual's life itself – with relationships to his private property, for example, with his family, household, insurance, and retirement – must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise.²⁸

As feminist theorists have significantly noted, Foucault's analysis of subjectivization is blind to the modalities of it that are particularly feminine, however.²⁹ The masculinity of the neoliberal economic subject is usually taken for granted. An important philosophical counter-argument to my claim about a neoliberal feminine subject would thus point out the clear discrepancy between liberal governmentality and the corresponding female subject. Feminist critics have convincingly argued that the idea that all of women's actions would be driven by calculated self-interest to the express exclusion of all other values has been absent or even structurally impossible in the liberal political paradigm. The naturalisation of the family in political liberalism meant that women could not be figured as the selfish and possessive individualists that men were. As Wendy Brown³⁰, for example, has argued, the subject of liberalism as a figure of fundamental self-interest and self-orientation is quite at odds with what women have been constituted as. The autonomous woman—the childless, unmarried or lesbian woman—has

²⁷ Lois McNay, "Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance in Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, no. 6 (2010), 55-77, 60-61, for example, notes that one of the most interesting aspects of Foucault's discussion neoliberalism is that the generalization of the enterprise form is conceived so exhaustively that it is not confined to social institutions but intended to encompass the individual itself. For illuminative analyses on Foucault's account of the neoliberal subject, see also e.g. Sam Binkley, "The Work of Neoliberal Governmentality: Temporality and Ethical Substance in the Tale of Two Dads," *Foucault Studies*, no. 6 (2009), 60-78; Trent Hamann, "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Ethics," *Foucault Studies*, no. 6 (2009), 37-59; Jason Read, "A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity," *Foucault Studies*, no. 6 (2009), 25-36; Andrew Dilts, "From 'Entrepreneur of the Self' to 'Care of the Self': Neo-liberal Governmentality and Foucault's Ethics," *Foucault Studies*, no. 12 (2011), 130-146.

²⁸ Foucault, *BB*, 241.

²⁹ See e.g. Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in I. Diamond and L. Quinby (eds.), *Feminism and Foucault: Paths of Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 61-85.

³⁰ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 157.

been a sign of disorderly society or of individual failure to 'adapt to femininity.' Such 'unnatural' figures make clearly visible how the social order presumed by liberalism is itself pervasively gendered, representing both a gendered division of labour and a gendered division of the sensibilities and activities of subjects. Women's traditional role in the family has been to surrender their self-interest so that their husbands and children can attain their autonomous subjectivity. The constitutive terms of liberal political discourse and practice—individual, autonomy, self-interest—fundamentally depend upon their implicit opposition to a subject and a set of activities marked 'feminine,' whilst effectively obscuring this dependence.³¹

I contend that in neoliberal governmentality, with its reductive treatment of all social issues as economic, the situation has significantly changed, however. We have witnessed a significant reconstitution of family, kinship, and intimate relationships in the recent decades: they too have been permeated by the logic of the market and have become less premised on permanent familial ties. It is not structurally impossible any longer that women could be liberal subjects in the full sense of the term—not only individual subjects of rights, but also egotistical subjects of interest. Because neoliberal governmentality has brought about the increasing commodification and marketization of the private realm—domestic and caring work, for example—the self-interest of particular women can now be bought relatively easily with the subordination and exploitation of others.

While we have to recognize that this commoditized domestic and caring work is still usually provided by other women, from a primarily economic perspective, the gender of the care-providers is becoming less significant too. Global neoliberal economy relies on women's labor, but also increasingly on the *feminization of labor*. This widely used, but ambiguous concept denotes, on the one hand, the quantitative increase of women in the labor market globally due to the growth of the service industries and the increasing demand for care work. However, it also denotes a qualitative change in the nature of labor: the characteristics historically present in women's work—precariousness, flexibility, fragmentary nature, low-status and low-pay—have come to increasingly characterize all work in global capitalism.³² As Rutvica Andrijasevic notes³³, this does not mean that the dualism production/reproduction no longer exists, but rather that reading it exclusively in terms of gendered division of labour does not fully capture contemporary forms of labour arrangements.³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.*, 152. See also e.g. Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

³² For different definitions of the concept *feminization of labour*, see e.g. Christina Morini, "The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism," *Feminist Review* 87 (2007), 40-59, 41-44.

³³ Rutvica Andrijasevic, *Migration, Agency and Citizenship in Sex Trafficking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

³⁴ Andrijasevic refers to feminist scholars such as Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (San Francisco and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997, 1983) and Elizabeth Bernstein, *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) who have made important contributions to mapping out the new emerging configurations of intimate life and emotional labour. They have studied customer-oriented relational work and sex work, respectively, and shown how emotional labour has been transposed from the sphere of domesticity to that of commerce.

Axel Honneth and Martin Hartmann³⁵ have also emphasized the importance of characteristics such as emotional resources and communicative skills in the “new” or “flexible” capitalism. They argue that the most important criterion describing the neoliberal revolution is no longer the workers’ ability to fulfil hierarchically determined parameters within a large enterprise; it is the readiness to self-responsibly bring one’s communicative skills and emotional resources to bear in the service of individualizing projects. Workers are expected to mobilize informal, emotional, “lifeworld skills” for professional goals, which results in the blending of private and public, informal and formal, skills and resources.³⁶ Although Honneth and Hartman do not analyse the gendered aspects of this development, the implication is that traditionally feminine abilities and characteristics, the emotional, relational and communicative competences, which were previously expected primarily from female workers are now increasingly expected from all workers.

Hence, the irreconcilable dualisms that traditionally constitute political liberalism—public/private, individual/family, autonomy/dependency, self-interest/selflessness—do not cut neatly between the two genders any more. They have now come to characterise increasingly the psychic life of working women torn between conflicting demands of femininity, as well as the internal divisions between different groups of women and men. This implies that women’s continued subordination as a *group* is not economically required for the kind of society that neoliberalism constructs.

Against this background, it is my contention that Walby dismisses rather easily the charge that feminism has been incorporated by neoliberalism. Because of her narrow understanding of neoliberalism as an economic policy opposing and threatening the welfare state she is unable to account for its constitutive effects on feminine and feminist subjects. She acknowledges that some neoliberals have claimed that neoliberalism is good for women, but insists that feminists themselves think nothing of the sort. For her, verifying such a charge would require producing empirical evidence showing that some feminist group actually agrees on the compatibility of feminism and neoliberalism. However, no such evidence exists. Instead Walby attempts to provide extensive evidence of the actual activities of feminist groups—the major feminist bodies in the UK, EU, US and UN—demonstrating that their goals are not compatible in any way with the neoliberal turn.³⁷

However, if we accept that women have, at least to some extent, become neoliberal subjects competing for the rewards in the new economic game, does Walby’s reduction of feminist thought and practice to a limited number of governmental bodies compatible with socialist policy really signal the strength and vibrancy of contemporary feminism? Would it not rather

³⁵ Axel Honneth and Martin Hartmann, “Paradoxes of Capitalism,” *Constellations*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2006), 41-58, 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁷ Walby, 21-22.

imply that feminism was somewhat out of touch with what is happening in the lives of young women today? It is obviously important to empirically show the concrete consequences that the cuts to the public sector have on the lives of women, but it is equally important to engage in a constitutive, philosophical analysis of its impact on the kinds of subjects that we have become. Feminist politics has to be able to somehow confront the overarching governmental framework in which the measure of women's liberation has become individual economic success and the choices women are able to make: to become executives or prostitutes, to have white weddings and to buy pornography.

Feminist politics must also raise new kinds of questions about solidarity. I strongly agree with Eisenstein that our response to the rise of neoliberalism requires challenging the individualism and self-determination traditionally animating liberal feminism. However, it is difficult to build solidarity on class consciousness among women when their economic situations are so vastly different. We need a broader and a more radical vision of feminist politics. Feminism must return to a critical analysis of capitalism, but we have to transform not only our political or economic institutions, but, more fundamentally, our way of life and even our selves. We also need a politics of ourselves that acknowledges that it is through us, our subjectivity that neoliberal governmentality is able to function.

The Cultural/Economic-Distinction

The concern that feminism was moving away from socialist political imaginary and neglecting issues of economic redistribution was acute already in the political debates of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dispersal of the Left. Feminists' fascination with post-structuralism and cultural identity politics was seen at that time as a failure to provide a systematic understanding of capitalist exploitation and to engage in class politics. The debate crystallized in the important exchange between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler on the distinction between the cultural and the economic.

In her article "Merely Cultural" Butler³⁸ responds to the charge that the cultural focus of post-structuralist feminist theory in the 1980s and 1990s had meant abandoning the materialist project of Marxism and had led us to the dead end of merely cultural politics—a self-centred and trivial form of politics that reduced political activism to the mere assertion and affirmation of cultural identity.³⁹ Although Butler refuses to name anyone who actually advocates such views, the article turns into a critique of Nancy Fraser's influential book *Justice Interruptus*⁴⁰ and of the key conceptual distinctions organising it. Fraser makes an analytic or heuristic distinction between socioeconomic injustices and their remedies, on the one hand, and cultural injustices and their remedies, on the other. This enables her to study the ways that political demands for redistribution and for recognition, respectively, can be most effectively combined.

³⁸ Judith Butler, "Merely Cultural," *Social Text*, 52/53, vol. 15, nos. 3 and 4 (1997), Queer Transexions of Race, Nation, and Gender, 265-277.

³⁹ Butler, 265.

⁴⁰ Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist Condition"* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Her aim is to overcome the culture/economy split by emphasizing the importance of both types of politics—we must advocate radical transformation of cultural categories *and* the institutions of political economy.

Gender, for example, has political-economic dimensions because it is a basic structuring principle of the political economy. Gender justice thus requires transforming the political economy: eliminating gender-specific exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation requires abolishing the gendered division of labour—both the gendered division between paid and unpaid labour and within paid labour. However, such political-economic restructuring is not enough because gender is not only a political-economic, but a cultural-valuational differentiation too. Gender injustices also include forms of androcentrism and cultural sexism: the pervasive devaluation and disparagement of things coded feminine. This devaluation is expressed in a range of harms suffered by women including sexual assault, sexual exploitation, pervasive domestic violence as well as trivializing, objectifying and demeaning stereotypical depictions in the media.⁴¹ In addition to political-economic redistribution we crucially need remedies of recognition too: changing the cultural evaluations as well as their legal and practical expressions that privilege masculinity and deny equal respect to women. Fraser thus bridges the opposition that Eisenstein, for example, erects between socialist feminism and poststructuralism: traditional socialist feminist politics must be combined with the cultural politics of post-structuralist feminism.

Butler attacks the viability of such combinatory politics, however. She argues that by reiterating the distinction between the economic and the cultural Fraser only entrenches the split by falsely reaffirming the existence of two separate spheres of politics with different objectives and instruments.⁴² She seeks to contest the stability of the distinction between cultural and economic on several grounds—she refers to currents of neo-Marxist thought as well as to the work of anthropologists such as Mauss and Levi-Strauss⁴³—but the crucial move in her critique, in my view, is not the destabilization of this distinction, but its politicization. She suggests that instead of being a purely ontological, theoretical, or analytical distinction, the cultural/economic distinction has a political function.

The way Butler explicates this political function is very brief, however. She claims that it is “tactically invoked for the purposes of marginalizing certain forms of political activism,” namely queer politics.⁴⁴ In other words, the distinction gives support to a social and sexual conservatism by making questions of sexuality and queer politics secondary to the “real business of politics.”⁴⁵ She also seeks to politicize the distinction in a second sense by briefly referring to Marx’s *Precapitalist Economic Formations*, in which Marx “seeks to explain how the cultural and the economic themselves became established as separable spheres—indeed, how the

⁴¹ Fraser, 20.

⁴² Butler, 270-71.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 274-76.

⁴⁴ Butler, 268.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

institution of the economic as a separate sphere is the consequence of an operation of abstraction initiated by capital itself."⁴⁶ In the section of the *Grundrisse* to which Butler refers, Marx analyses the historical development that led from pre-capitalist economic formations to capitalism. He seeks to identify the historic prerequisites for the development of capitalism – labourers with nothing but their labour power to sell, on the one hand, and capital, on the other. Through various historical processes of dissolution an economic formation developed which was based on exchange-values and money, as opposed to use-values and forms of property corresponding to small-scale production. This process made possible the transformation of money into capital and it separated the labourer from his own means of production.⁴⁷

As is often the case with Marx, it is debatable whether this is intended as a historical argument or as an argument concerning the inevitable logic of capitalism. Butler's use of phrases such as "initiated by capital itself" gives the impression that she reads it in the latter sense. While such reading accomplishes a politicization of the economic/cultural distinction by revealing that this distinction is essential for the exploitation of labourers by capitalists, politicizing it in this way is not particularly helpful in the contemporary feminist context as it does not enable us to get a grip of the historically specific political challenges that neoliberalism presents.

In her response to Butler, Fraser emphasises that she does not understand or utilize the cultural/economic—distinction as an ontological distinction, but as a distinction that is historically specific to advanced capitalism.⁴⁸ She contends that Butler has resurrected one of the worst aspects of 1970s Marxism and Marxist-feminism by relying on an ahistorical reading of Marx and by putting forward an "overtotalized" view of capitalist society: "What gets lost is the specificity of capitalist society as a distinctive and highly peculiar form of social organization."⁴⁹ Fraser follows Karl Polanyi in arguing that in pre-state, pre-capitalist societies the cultural/economic distinction was essentially unstable: neither distinctively economic relations nor distinctively cultural relations existed. A single order of social relations handled both economic and cultural integration. However, such matters are relatively uncoupled in capitalist society, which is characterized by gaps between status and class, culture and economy. Nineteenth-century industrial society, in which economic activity became isolated and imput-

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁴⁷ See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin, 1965), 471-514.

⁴⁸ Fraser begins by rejecting what she takes to amount to a mere misunderstanding of her position before tackling the genuine disagreements. She emphasises rightly that the way she understands misrecognition is material: it is an institutionalized social relation, not a psychological state or something merely symbolic. Butler's argument that because gays and lesbians suffer material, economic harms their oppression is not properly categorised as misrecognition is thus simply a mischaracterization of her claim. In Fraser's conception, injustices of misrecognition are just as material as injustices of maldistribution. The material harms cited by Butler—the instances in which lesbian and gays are excluded from state-sanctioned notions of the family and the accompanying benefits, for example—thus constitute paradigmatic cases of misrecognition. (Nancy Fraser, "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism. A Response to Judith Butler," *Social Text*, no. 52/53, *Queer Transxions of Race, Nation, and Gender*, 279-289, 282)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

ed to a distinctive economic motive, was historically a singular departure.⁵⁰ Fraser thus defends her position against Butler's attempt to destabilize the distinction between the economic and the cultural by insisting that the distinction can be usefully applied to capitalist society in order to understand its social-structurally differentiated and historically specific character.⁵¹

While emphasizing the historical specificity of the distinction Fraser refuses to acknowledge that it serves a political function—either of marginalizing queer-politics or of stabilizing capitalism. She denies outright that she has used it tactically to marginalize queer sexualities. Empirical evidence refutes Butler's second, Marxist claim that capitalism initiates and relies on this distinction. According to Fraser, observing contemporary capitalism makes evident that it does not attempt to push gays and lesbians outside of the economic sphere; instead it has readily seen the economic advantages of accommodating them and viewing them as potential consumers.⁵² The distinction between the cultural and economic is thus not a political distinction in either of the senses advocated by Butler. It is simply an analytically useful distinction for understanding the specificity of capitalist society.

Despite their differences, both Butler and Fraser turn to analyses of capitalism in their attempts to account for the institution of the economic/cultural distinction. They do not question how the political formation of the economic domain has changed in the current neoliberal governmentality. I strongly agree with Fraser that we must not understand the economic/cultural distinction as a fixed, ontological distinction, but as historically specific to advanced capitalism. However, in my view Fraser brushes aside too quickly the possibility that this distinction might have a political function. Butler's use of phrases such as "tactically invoked" and "initiated by capital itself" is unfortunate as it suggests that these political effects are reducible to deliberate tactics and specific political interests.⁵³ I therefore suggest that we turn to Foucault next in order to critically investigate the political effects of the economic/cultural distinction in neoliberal governmentality.

A Genealogy of the Economic

Foucault's lectures on liberal and neoliberal governmentality provide us with a genealogy of the economic—not a history of the concept, but a genealogy of the governmentality that established the economic as a autonomous realm of reality with its own laws and regularities. For Foucault, physiocrats such as Francois Quesnay and their economic doctrine represent "the founding act of economic thought" in the sense that with them not only a whole new conception of the economy emerges, but, crucially, the free market starts to operate as the principle of

⁵⁰ See e.g. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 74.

⁵¹ Fraser, "Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism. A Response to Judith Butler," 287.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵³ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 83, also interprets Butler to be arguing that the economy/culture distinction is "a kind of ruse of capitalist liberal discourse."

good government.⁵⁴ In *The Order of Things* Foucault had already shown how economic analysis remained on the level of an analysis of wealth in the 17th century and how, in the 18th century with the physiocrats, a new domain of knowledge, political economy, was opened up.⁵⁵ In the lecture series *Security, Territory, Population*, he is no longer interested in the emergence of political economy “in terms of an archaeology of knowledge,” but he now wants to “consider it from the perspective of a genealogy of techniques of power.”⁵⁶ With the physiocrats, political economy emerges not only as a science, but also as a technique of intervention in the field of reality understood as the economy. Their study of market mechanisms was thus both a scientific analysis of what happens and a program of what should happen.

Foucault argues that it would be wrong to simply concede that physiocratic economic theory produced a shift in economic policy as its practical consequence.⁵⁷ What occurred instead was a fundamental reorganization of the theoretical field of economics as well as of the techniques of government. Physiocrats rejected any analysis of economic processes in terms of morality and approached them instead as autonomous, natural phenomena governed by scientific laws and regularities. With their doctrine of “economic government” the art of government too reached a certain threshold of “science.”⁵⁸

The word “economy” designated a form of government in the sixteenth century; in the eighteenth century, through a series of complex processes that are absolutely crucial for our history, it will designate a level of reality and a field of intervention for government.⁵⁹

Hence, through the work of the physiocrats the modern conception of the economy emerged as an autonomous sphere of society and as an object of scientific knowledge in political history. This was highly significant for our conception of good government and, more generally, for our understanding of the political. The establishment of an autonomous and self-regulating economic sphere was not a deliberate political act tactically invoked or initiated by anybody, but this does not mean that it had no political effects. A key aim of Foucault’s genealogy is precisely an analysis of these political effects on our social reality.

⁵⁴ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78*, edited by Michel Senellart (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 33. Physiocrats were a school of economists founded in 18th century France. Their key tenet was the curious belief that land was the source of all wealth, but they also advocated the idea that profoundly influenced Adam Smith and economic liberalism that government policy should not interfere with the operation of natural economic laws. Foucault discusses the physiocrats in several instances in the lectures *Security, Territory, Population* – the lectures that preceded *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁶ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 36.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

In terms of contemporary politics, perhaps the most worrying political effect of the autonomy of the economic sphere has been the exclusion of many economic and political decisions from the realm of democratic governance. The identification of policy issues as economic rather than as social, cultural or political means that they are understood as morally and politically neutral and can therefore be removed from democratic decision making processes to the exclusive territory of economic experts and financial institutions. As neoliberal governmentality spreads, this depoliticization of the social realm becomes more pronounced, because a key feature of neoliberal governmentality is the potentially unlimited expansion of the economic: it attempts to bring all aspects of life under economic rationality. Its key aim is not the creation of free market economy, but free market society.

Foucault shows in his lectures how the Chicago school economists took this idea to the extreme. They found that the generalization of the economic form of the market to the whole of society functioned effectively as a grid of intelligibility and as a principle of decipherment for social relationships and individual behavior. It was possible to reveal in traditionally non-economic processes, relations, and behavior a number of formal and intelligible relations.⁶⁰ Economy was no longer one domain among others with its own particular rationality, it was increasingly understood as the rationality of the entirety of human action.⁶¹ An essential feature of neoliberal governmentality is not just the eradication of market regulation, for example, but, more fundamentally, the eradication of the border between the social and the economic: market rationality – cost-benefit calculation – must be extended and disseminated to all institutions and social practices. Every social practice and policy – not only economic policy – must be submitted to economic profitability analyses and organized according to the principles of competition.

Foucault's lectures importantly question the common perception of neoliberalism as a lack of government. He insists that it is a specific governmental form and doctrine that aims to create a society organized according to competition. Competition is not a natural phenomenon or a pre-given foundation of society that only has to be allowed to rise to the surface and discovered. Instead, competition is a formal mechanism that allows inequalities to function in a way that is stimulating for the economy and effective in terms of allocating resources. In other words, a competent government must undertake the task of producing an effective market by means of competition.⁶² While the key problem in the liberalism of Adam Smith in the eighteenth century had been to cut out a free space for the market within an already given political society, the problem of neoliberalism was rather how the overall exercise of political power could be modeled on the principles of a market economy. It was a question not of freeing an empty space, but of taking the formal principles of a market economy and projecting them

⁶⁰ Foucault, *BB*, 243-5.

⁶¹ See e.g. Gary Becker, "Investment in Human Capital: A Theoretical Analysis," *Journal of Political Economy* 70, no. 2, part 2: "Investment in Human Beings," (1962), 9-49; Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1964).

⁶² Foucault, *BB*, 120-21.

onto the general art of government.⁶³ “Neoliberalism should not therefore be identified with laissez-faire, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention.”⁶⁴ It was an intervening liberalism: it has to intervene everywhere in order to create effective competition in free markets and to actively oppose all inferior methods of coordinating individual efforts, such as central planning. Planning is required, but it has to be planning for competition, not instead of it.⁶⁵

Hence, even if we accept Fraser’s claim that the cultural/economic distinction characterizes capitalist societies as opposed to precapitalist ones, we have to ask how the dividing line between the two spheres has shifted in contemporary society dominated by neoliberal governmentality and the rapid expansion of the economic sphere and its market rationality. Is the distinction still theoretically meaningful when everything, from the quality of the care a mother gives to her child to the production of knowledge, can be, and increasingly must be, viewed as an economic matter? What are the political effects of this expansion of the economic? Neoliberal governmentality effectively undermines the relative autonomy of all, but the economic domain. It entails the erosion of social practices, political activities and institutions that are not organized along market rationalities, but are based instead on moral values and political ideals, for example. When all political decisions are submitted to “value-neutral” economic assessment, forms of radical politics, including feminist politics, become meaningless.

Perhaps the greatest political challenge neoliberalism presents to feminist politics therefore concerns the extension of the economic realm itself. We have to study critically the political processes and the criteria that determine the allocation of social issues in the spheres of the cultural and the economic rather than just accepting this distinction as a politically neutral tool. Feminist resistance to neoliberalism would ultimately have to mean deliberately pushing back the encroachment of the social by the economic with a broader vision of politics and of the good life. The feminist response to neoliberalism cannot therefore be limited to issues of economic redistribution: how wealth can be distributed more evenly among the sexes, for example. We must also raise more fundamental questions about the limits of the markets and of economic rationality itself. Feminist theory and politics should form a strong and vocal strand in the public, political and moral debate on the acceptable limits of the markets—a debate our societies acutely need today.

One area in which such feminist debate must be central is sexuality. While second-wave feminism was initially almost unanimously opposed to all forms of sex work condemning it as a form of patriarchal domination or even male violence, during 1970s and 1980s a feminist position gradually developed that was strongly pro-prostitution. Today feminists are starkly divided between so called ‘abolitionist’ and ‘sex-workers’ rights’ perspectives. Abolitionists generally identify prostitution with the selling of the body and consequently of the self. It is a

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁵ See e.g. Friedrich Hayek, *A Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1944), 13, 27.

self-estranging activity “destructive of woman’s humanity.”⁶⁶ This position is countered by sex workers rights advocates, who insist that what is sold in prostitution is not the body, but a service, and that what a client pays for is sex worker’s time and not indiscriminate access to her body. They criticise the abolitionist position as moralizing and utopian: the best way to protect vulnerable women is not to eradicate the market for sex by legislative means, but to use political power to organize that market in a way that makes it safer and less exploitative for sex-workers. Sex work must be understood essentially as a service sector job determined by the operative conditions of the labour market as well as other factors regulating the supply and demand of sexual services. As Wendy Chapkis⁶⁷, for example argues, viewing erotic labour as a form of service work is less grand and poetic than imagining the prostitute’s soul in mortal danger through the commodification of its most intimate aspects, but such formulation has the advantage of pointing critics in the direction of practical interventions such as workplace organizing and broader political campaigns to increase the status and respect accorded to those performing the labour.⁶⁸

While the economic approach has undoubtedly made it easier to recognize and analyse the specific forms of exploitation that sex-workers face, we should nevertheless be wary of how such feminist position converges with neoliberal governmentality—the expansion of market rationality to all areas of life. While in Fraser’s schema pornography and prostitution are still understood, not only as economic issues, but importantly also as cultural harms that require remedies of recognition, in neoliberal governmentality they must be treated solely as economic issues concerned with adequate working conditions, toughening markets and forms of entrepreneurial conduct. As one of the call girls interviewed in Chapkis’ book states, the most serious impediments to a sex worker’s success are “dysfunctional behaviour and limited investments skills.”⁶⁹ The sex workers’ rights position thus operates according to the same economic logic as neoliberalism aiming to only ameliorate the destructive effects of free markets through the implementation of labour regulations. It is therefore important to consider how such a purely economic approach to sex work may contribute to the increasing difficulty of raising critical questions about the moral limits of markets—the fundamental question of what we as society believe should be for sale. If part of the appeal of the free markets lies in the fact that “markets do not wag fingers,” I believe that there are new reasons to insist that feminist politics must, in many instances, continue to do so.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See e.g. Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 32.

⁶⁷ Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts. Women Performing Erotic Labour* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 82.

⁶⁸ Those who view prostitution as an inherently abusive practice generally support prohibition of the act and punishment of some or all parties involved. In contrast, those who view prostitution as a form of labour tend to advocate policies designed to enhance worker control through decriminalization, regulation and worker self-organizing. While decriminalization entails only the removal of criminal penalties for sexual commerce, legalization implies state regulation of the trade. (Chapkis, 131, 155)

⁶⁹ Chapkis, 102.

⁷⁰ Cf. Michael Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

I am thus suggesting that feminists must continue to critically question sex work, but they should not do so from a universalist moral perspective concerned with static female subjects and their natural and fundamental human rights, however. As feminist research has demonstrated, sex worker's subjectivities are complex and do not easily fit into the binaries between forced/voluntary, victim/free agent, active/passive. From a Foucauldian perspective, their subjectivities too have to be examined in relation to the governmental rationalities, power relations, discursive regimes and juridical norms that constitute them. It is also important to note how human rights discourse can cut both ways: abolitionists are opposed to prostitution because they view it as a violation of women's human rights, but the sex workers' rights advocates utilize human rights discourse too when arguing that states' attempts to criminalise sex work or penalize sex workers is a denial of the human right to self-determination to those who make an individual choice to enter prostitution.⁷¹

A critical feminist perspective to sex work does thus not have to fall back on universalist human rights discourse, but, in the context of neoliberal governmentality, sex work should be approached as an issue concerned with the politically constituted and contestable limits of the markets. While I acknowledge that particular forms of rights discourse might well have strategic utility in the political contestation of the power of the markets, ultimately we need more radical political tools than human rights in order to fundamentally contest our current neoliberal governmentality.⁷²

In sum, while in Marxist and socialist analyses neoliberalism is often seen just as an intensification of capitalism, it is in fact a distinctive organizing principle for both economic and social life. As Wendy Brown⁷³ writes, the political rationality of neoliberalism could be read as issuing from a stage of capitalism that simply underscores Marx's argument that capital penetrates and transforms every aspect of life—remaking everything in its image and reducing every activity and value to its cold rationale. However, such analysis would not bring into view the form of governmentality neoliberalism replaces and the new form it inaugurates. Neither would it expose the modalities of resistance neoliberalism renders outmoded and those that must be developed if it is to be effectively challenged. While I have attempted to argue that Foucault's thought provides us with valuable tools for the acute diagnostic task that the rise of neoliberalism presents for critical inquiry, I acknowledge, however, that his thought alone will be inadequate for the prescriptive task that must follow—for the political project of designing and promoting alternative rationalities for the regulation of the practices through which we are governed and govern ourselves. In addition to far-reaching environmental politics, radical Marxist-feminist projects might well prove themselves invaluable for that task. Nevertheless, I

⁷¹ Rutvica Andrijasevic (57-58) describes the process of negotiating the UN Trafficking protocol, for example, as having been contested by two main feminist NGOs: the Human Rights Causus, defending the position that prostitution is a form of legitimate labour, and second, the International Human Rights Network, adamant that prostitution was a violation of women's human rights.

⁷² For an illuminating discussion on Foucault's position on rights discourse and the political potential of rights as a form of opposition to neoliberal governance, see McNay, 70-74.

⁷³ Brown, *Edgework*, 44-45.

hope to have shown that we cannot simply return to socialist or Marxist feminisms as if post-structuralism had never happened, nor can we simply complement them with the merely cultural politics of post-structuralism. We face new challenges that have to be met with the sharpest political and theoretical tools that we have at our disposal. Foucault's thought remains one of those tools.

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