FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZATION, (POST)FEMINISMS AND (HOMO)NORMATIVITIES

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Introduction

Proponents of neoliberal globalization believe that market liberalization – typically premised on a free-market economy and characterized by deregulation, privatization and other forms of economic restructuring (Harvey 2005) – is beneficial to societies across the globe in gender-neutral ways. For women, an early promise of neoliberal economic reforms at the macro-scale included the creation of more employment opportunities, both locally and abroad. It was argued that this would lead to women’s empowerment and gender equality, as access to the productive (work) sphere would free them of their oppression in the reproductive (domestic) realm. At the micro-scale, neoliberalism’s emancipation of women from patriarchal oppression was to be experienced through the ability and right to make choices, for example through entrepreneurship and consumerism.

Lately, however, ‘even the most devoted believers in the neoliberal paradigm will have had their convictions shaken’, as markets have been found to be neither self-correcting nor efficient allocators of resources (Cornwall et al. 2008, 1–2; Newman 2013). Neoliberal policies have been ineffective, arguably because of how economic activities remain structured by a rigid oppositional dichotomy whereby the market is equated with the masculine and the household with the feminine (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003). A more radical proposition for the failure of neoliberalism to effect change is that (Western) feminism has become, either unknowingly, voluntarily or by force, complicit with neoliberalism, despite the effects of the latter going against feminism’s general aims (Fraser 2013; Korolczuk 2016; McRobbie 2009; Thorpe et al. 2017). Thus, rather than counteracting neoliberalism’s negative effects on the feminist movement, neoliberal feminism is seen as contributing to the project of corporate globalization and reinforcing heteronormative notions of womanhood alongside their socially ascribed roles as altruistic caretakers (Lind, 2010) in society and the family.

Neoliberalism’s contradictory relationship with feminism is partially attributed to its conceptual ambiguity. ‘Neoliberalism’ is often used loosely by proponents and critics as a catch-all term for a miscellany of ideas that underscore private enterprise as well as the ‘rolling back’ of the state (Stiglitz 2008). Discussions of neoliberalism often fail to specify which of its facets – for
example, global macroeconomic doctrine; political ideology or a mode of governmentality cul-
tivating certain cultural dispositions; or the selective appropriation of technological assemblages – is being referenced (Calkin 2015; Ferguson 2010; Gregor and Grzebalska 2016; Newman 2013). Yet, as Larner (2000, 6) argues, attempting to differentiate between the various inferences is not just an intellectual exercise; it also affects our understanding of the ‘scope and content of possible political interventions’.

In the rest of this chapter, we consider some key issues in scholarship at the intersections of neoliberal globalization and feminism, with respect to three interventions: development and women as neoliberal subjects; the proliferation of (post-)feminist identities; and queer politics under neoliberalism. The first relates to a fundamental issue that has been at the heart of most feminist projects, while the latter two pertain to more recent concerns.

**Global development and the ideal neoliberal subject**

Arguably, women have often been positioned as integral to neoliberal strategies. Their place in neoliberal economies and the impact of developmental policies on women, however, have not been uncontested. In the Global North, feminists’ critique of the male-breadwinner model has contributed to women’s greater participation in the economy (Newman 2013). In the Global South, the ‘third-world woman’ featured prominently on the development agenda in the 1970s as part of liberal feminists’ ‘win-win’ narrative, whereby integrating women into development through the ‘feminization of policy’ was argued to be beneficial not just for the women and their families but for their communities and nations (Calkin 2015; see also Roy 2010). In this view, the archetypal ‘third-world woman’ is commonly (re)presented as the ‘solution’ to poverty, because her ‘gendered subjectivity [renders her] self-sacrificing’ (Wilson 2011, 325). For instance, with respect to Latin America’s foreign debt crisis in the 1980s, the establishment of numerous community-based organizations, such as communal kitchens and day-care centres, pivoted on women’s voluntary contributions to poverty management (Lind 2010). While neoliberalism no longer casts women as passive victims, their new and unique ‘entrepreneurial potential’ derives from and is dependent upon their altruistic ‘maternal nature’ (Calkin 2015, 301). In other words, in reality, the costs of neoliberal restructuring (e.g. cuts in spending on social welfare) are absorbed by women’s unpaid work, thereby entrenching long-standing gender inequalities, even if some women have been politically empowered in the process.

Accordingly, neoliberalism re(de)fines gender norms by constructing the ‘good woman’, especially of the Global South, as the ideal neoliberal subject whose dormant economic agency, once tapped, will reinvest any gains received from the market into her family and community (while her male counterpart spends on himself). Thus, women have been the targets of transnational NGO and corporate initiatives, such as Oxfam’s ‘Oxfam Unwrapped’, Goldman Sach’s ‘10,000 Women’ and Nike Foundation’s ‘Girl Effect’ campaigns, in international development efforts (Wilson 2011). The ‘good woman’ is also the selfless ‘third-world’ mother/daughter/sister, migrating in search of work as an entertainer, domestic worker or other form of low-level service work in response to (transnational) employment opportunities opened up by neoliberal globalization. Arat-Koc (2006) contends that migrant domestic workers especially are ideal subjects of the neoliberal state because, first, the economic, social and psychic costs of their work are largely transferred to a different location/country; second, they enable both their own and their middle-class female employers’ social reproduction in the private sphere to remain invisible; and third, by enabling wealthier women to participate in the workforce, they deflect the need to change gender relations in society.
Critics have highlighted the negative outcomes of neoliberal economic policies on women’s entry into the labour force. In countries of the Global North, such as the UK, state reforms to administrative and governance structures have resulted in, *inter alia*, low wages and poor labour standards in sectors associated with female labour, especially at the lower end of the job market (Cornwall et al. 2008). Further, while the large number of migrant women employed in developed countries challenge traditional notions of ‘masculinist hypermobility’ (Pratt and Yeoh 2003), they typically become ‘disenfranchised diasporic citizens’ (Hawkesworth 2006, 202; Moghadam 2005). Instead of alleviating the burden of domestic care on women, global restructuring has intensified the privatization of social reproduction by engendering an international transition towards the abandonment of the family wage (in lieu of the living wage) and declining welfare regimes (Bakker and Silvey 2008).

Criticism has also been levelled at the construction of women as self-regulating entrepreneurs and responsible decision-makers who, in the face of neoliberal reconfigurations of the global economy, always ‘choose’ to act in the best interests of their families; this is seen as simply entrenching a ‘feminization of responsibility’ (Sharp 2007; Wilson 2011). Relatedly, critical commentators have noted how terms originally associated with feminist activism – such as ‘empowerment’, ‘agency’ and even ‘gender’ – have been appropriated by the mainstream lexicon on development and cited ‘in the context of strategies for survival rather than transformation, and … of the individual, rather than the collective’ (Thorpe et al. 2017, 375). This empties them of their activist content while contributing to an unprecedented evisceration of feminist politics (Batliwala 2007; Prügl 2015; Wilson 2011, 318). While highlighting how feminist theorists have introduced new frameworks – such as market feminism (Kantola and Squires 2012), corporate feminism (Gill 2016; Prügl 2015), hegemonic feminism (Eisenstein 2009), transnational business feminism (Roberts 2012, 2015) and faux feminism² (McRobbie 2009) – to ‘rehabilitate feminist discourses and goals’, Calkin (2015, 302) cautions against simple claims of co-option; instead, she calls for the need to recognize ‘the multiple and sometimes contradictory strands of feminism’.

Neoliberalizing (post-)feminism

A more salient theme that has surfaced since the 1990s, especially in feminist media and cultural circles, centres on the profound links between neoliberalism and post-feminism. Post-feminism has been an interesting topic of intellectual investigation, one that gestures towards a (con)fusion of feminist as well as anti-feminist idea(l)s by encompassing, yet also repudiating, the key objectives of second-wave feminism. Set against this backdrop of ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Braidotti 2005), the social status of women is now narrowly defined by their financial capabilities, which would, in turn, augment liberalist goals such as choice and independence.

Moran (2017, 123) contends that post-feminism can be subsumed under neoliberalism because both valorise ‘privatization, deregulation and deinstitutionalization’, which then encourages individualism, optimization and responsibilization. Additionally, these post-feminist proclivities have proliferated rapidly through sophisticated media technologies and virtual relationalities, thereby equipping geographically distant individuals with the interpretative resources to reconstruct their personhood. Relatedly, post-feminism has become synonymous with a ‘weightless’ consumer culture that does little to defy heteropatriarchal regimes or sexual–legal frameworks. For example, ‘retail therapy’, as a means of sedimenting one’s self-worth, perpetuates a tyranny of slenderness, while the media obsession with spectacular performances of beauty has exacerbated the self-objectification and surveillance of women’s bodies (Gill 2016). Women are lauded as ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’, exerting ‘aesthetic labour’ while internalizing the male gaze in order to appear more youthful, hyperfeminine and heterosexy (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017),
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especially in the face of a sex-positive porno-chic or raunch culture (Attwood 2014). Moreover, neoliberal sensibilities conjure up feminism in a way that projects it as an anachronistic spent force, as denoted in the prefix ‘post-’ (McRobbie 2004; Scharff 2016; also, see Gill et al. 2017 for a discussion on how the ‘post-’ in ‘post-feminism’ may be interpreted). Consequently, young women who see themselves as forerunners of social change are attending to feminism in ways that render it a ‘cheer word’ – ‘unimpeachable, but also devoid of substance’ (Gill 2016, 619, 623; 2017; McRobbie 2007, 2009). For instance, the freedom to consume has become conflated with the freedom of (sexual) expression, both of men’s rights to procure (foreign) women’s bodies and of women’s rights to put them up for sale. Market values have subsequently attained a moralistic status, with strategic consumption acting as a panacea for various social problems. The ‘good female’ consumer is therefore abstracted from grids of power in such a reductionist conceptualization of agency (Ferguson 2010; Gill 2007).

Concomitantly, feminists have expounded on the contradictions of post-feminine identities in two ways. First, its premature pronouncement of gender equality entails a full accounting of feminism in order that it be disavowed. McRobbie (2007) calls this a post-feminist masquerade in which gender norms are reified and patriarchy is reaffirmed. Second, women are now ironically disempowered by the clichéd discourses of empowerment that they are being offered (Fahs 2011; McRobbie 2009; Tan 2014). Within a neoliberal imperative of choice, a woman’s voluntaristic will is inflected through ‘compulsory individuality’ (Cronin 2000, 277).

Feminists have also questioned whether membership in the ‘global sisterhood’ of post-femininity is exclusive to White, conventionally good-looking women. They have cast doubts on how post-feminism may be relevant to women with intersectional identities who may be ‘globally scattered’ outside the metropolitan core (Butler 2013; Lazar 2006; Nast 2002; Tasker and Negra 2007). Nonetheless, post-feminism as a transnational culture has circulated widely, with ‘post-colonial elites’ in the Global South (Dosekun 2015, 966), adapting it vis-à-vis vernacular socio-cultural practices. Examples include well-educated women in India (Grewal 2005; Parameswaran 2004; Reddy 2006), Nigeria (Dosekun 2015) and Singapore (Lazar 2009).

Crucially, however, post-colonial feminist scholars have taken issue with a monolithic view of (post)feminine and (post-)feminist subjectivities that reinforces the dichotomy between the ‘West and the rest’, thereby implying that what transpires elsewhere (outside the West) is merely a watered-down derivative of a more legitimate version. Ultimately, this perspective ‘traps non-Western [women] in a double-bind’: that they should either adhere to a neoliberalist tyranny of ‘emancipation’ or adopt victim-posturing as a strategy (Giraldo 2016, 165). For example, McRobbie (2007, 733) presents the image of a hypothetical non-Western ‘global girl’ imitating ‘her Western counterpart’ and whose citizenship is shaped by her consumption habits. ‘Global girl’ as a governable subject may feature in the local edition or local equivalent of an international women’s magazine — she does not necessarily hope to live in the West, yet desires the commodities linked to Western femininity and sexuality (McRobbie 2009). Invocations of ‘global’ brands and subscriptions to Anglo-American yardsticks of beauty in non-Western contexts may serve to reposition post-feminism squarely in the West yet also cite a Western aesthetic with a different spin (Sensoy and Marshall 2010; Switzer 2013; Wilson 2011). In a close reading of a magazine for English-reading Indian women, Femina, Reddy (2006, 75) notes the tension between a ‘nationalist naturalization’ of Indian beauty (plump lips, darker skin) and the ‘cultural appropriation’ of Western beauty as Indian (big, lined eyes, fairer skin, bleached blonde hair).

Regardless, it is still possible for local feminist histories displaying a different trajectory from White Western ones to be discounted in both the developed and the developing world, where
settler colonialism is writ large. It is still unclear how post-feminism can exist in tandem with more traditional, grassroots-oriented forms of politics.

Queering/querying neoliberalism

The literature on queer politics and neoliberalism, the third theme of this chapter, has developed along two strands: how sexual politics ‘filter[s] through a multi-scalar system’ via a global–local nexus (Podmore 2013, 265); and investigations of LGBT-friendly cities beyond a homonormative logic. In recognizing the spread of a globally identifiable gay lifestyle, scholars have argued that Eurocentric practices are not easily replicated in other cultural contexts (Altman 2004a). The perception of equality and progressiveness in Western cities, vis-à-vis the liberalization of sexual laws, has been vehemently critiqued alongside the assumption that LGBT activism necessarily gets diffused from the (Western) core to the (Eastern) periphery. Whereas transnational LGBT coalitions may have (in)directly influenced LGBT movements all over the world, Asian academics have asserted that Southern cities are not mere imitations of their Western counterparts. Moreover, they have evinced that the process of queer globalization is not unidirectional or universal; neither is there a stark dichotomy between the wholesale acceptance and rejection of sexual democracies from the Anglo-American world. Instead of homogenization, hybrid regional identifications, such as ‘Queer Asia’, may emerge (Leung 2009). Concomitantly, they have cautioned against a reactionary rush towards the celebration of Indigenous sexual cultures, one that abhors anything non-local, or the adoption an occidentalist approach that permeates the non-West as being completely distinct from the West (Altman 2004b).

In the past two decades, queer theorists and critical geographers have identified the rise of new homonormativities and homonalism. Homonormative tendencies refer to an assimilated homosexuality that incorporates gays and lesbians into state-sanctioned institutions, such as monogamous marriage, thereby transforming them into exemplary citizens (Duggan 2003). Homonalism takes its cue from a post-9/11 moment in the United States’ history. It marshals the ‘acceptance’ of gays and lesbians on a larger scale, but this sexual inclusivity is consolidated by racial exclusivity and xenophobia (Puar 2013). Taken together, such proclivities and their overtones of ‘queer liberalism’ (Eng et al. 2005) perpetuate ‘a demobilised gay constituency’ (Duggan 2002, 179), whereby aspirations for sexual diversity have been supplanted by fervent claims to full citizenship (for example, equalizing the age of sexual consent and the reform of discriminatory laws). More pertinently, these claims have perpetuated a privatized gay culture that situates the burden of social welfare firmly within the domestic sphere. For Nast (2002), a penchant for privatization and consumerism has clearly shored up the patriarchal and racist lifestyle of gay White men. In the West, the integration of ‘gaybourhoods’ into plans for urban regeneration and global reimaging, primarily for the purpose of capital accumulation, has been well studied by human geographers (Gorman-Murray and Waitt 2009). Central to this accommodationist form of neoliberalism is that of ‘pink washing’, a normalization of gay/lesbian leisure and recreational landscapes resting on the differentiation between queer-friendly and queer-phobic establishments (Puar 2013).

Academics, however, have started to complicate the simplistic and American-centric conceptualizations of homonormativity, which are mainly informed by studies of politically liberal cities in the Global North. Critical geographers have attempted to disrupt the univocality of commercialism while being wary of totalizing representations of homonormativity as a seemingly unassailable force (Brown 2008, 2009; Lewis 2013). Inspired by Gibson-Graham’s (1996, xi) call for an ‘anti-capitalist politics of economic invention’, Brown (2009) avoids rehashing trite discourses on ‘pink washing’ by emphasizing the socio-cultural roles played by pro-LGBT
sites in terms of service provision, community building and political recognition. In so doing, he teases out the not-for-profit ‘queer commons’ (Brown 2009, 1504) or ‘community economies’ that are evident even during commercialized hallmark activities such as pride parades, where information and resources may be exchanged on the premise of goodwill or reciprocity. Additionally, he points out alternative sites of faith-based LGBT socialization, steeped in activist work as well as care-giving centres.

Likewise, Squires (2017) surmises that certain LGBT events may exhibit some neoliberal elements yet are not stereotypically or reducibly so, thereby calling for a more sustained academic engagement with localized manifestations of homonormativity. This may entail a closer examination of racially inflected ‘parties with a politics’ (Browne 2007), the spatialization of gender variations in consumption and other kinds of ‘the queer unwanted’ that remain understudied. For Squires (2017), the scholarship on homonormal spaces has positioned sexual minorities of colour at the two extreme ends of a spectrum, as either hapless victims or heroic freedom-fighters in a capitalist economy.

This parallels some of arguments of Oswin (2005, 2008), who opines that most critiques of the White, middle-class gay man perpetuate a binary between conventional versus radical sexual subjectivities. Rather than fixing the analytical spotlight on the distinctly or authentically counter-hegemonic, she attends to complicit queer subjectivities or spaces that have always been, to varying degrees, embroiled in reinforcing not just neoliberal ideologies but also other dominant forms of performing gender, ethnicities and nationalities. Moreover, Brown (2009) contends that if complicity highlights how seemingly ‘transgressive’ sites can shore up the hegemons, practices that appear to be ‘assimilationist’ may similarly harbour unexpected potential for expanding alternative scripts for queer living.

Outside the West, attempts have been made to appreciate the cultural methods of queer Asian activism on its own terms. Thus, unlike an American queer politics, which is marked by being out, loud and proud, the LGBT landscape in East Asia is characterized by a ‘reticent poetics’ that stresses harmonious familial/communal relations (Liu and Ding 2005). For example, scholars have noted how social movements in Singapore’s censorious political climate necessitate calculated manoeuvres and prudent discretion. Thus, Pink Dot, the city-state’s most high-profile LGBT event, does not opt for either belligerent protests or flamboyant pride parades but is infused with a pro-family rather than a pro-gay rhetoric to avoid a clampdown by the government. Far from ‘disabl[ing] political analysis’, as Duggan (2003, xx) propounds, the dissemination of a culturally resonant maxim of ‘every LGBT person a family member’ has helped to garner the support of straight allies in the city-state. From a Western lens, Pink Dot may appear to be a manifestation of homonormativity and homonationalism but through the lenses of Asia, it epitomizes tacticality and inventiveness on the part of a ‘queer subaltern constituency’ (Lazar 2017, 421).

**Concluding thoughts**

By gathering current debates on development, post-feminism and homonormativity, we have shown how feminist and queer culture has been ‘colonized’ by neoliberal discourses of gender/sexuality. By assuming that individuals possess the capacity to mitigate the inequalities that they confront on an everyday basis just by working harder, for example, neoliberal feminism and queer liberalism promote a false consciousness that obviates the motivation for real changes. In sum, these three themes highlight the need for a closer inspection of a purportedly celebratory rhetoric to avoid taking them at face value, and to reassess these ideologies of progress vis-à-vis actual improvements in people’s lives. This may mean acknowledging the feminist/queer project is an unfinished one. As such, critical scholarship must resist the ‘pasting’ (Tasker

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and Negra 2007) and ‘overing’ (Ahmed 2012) of sexism and homophobia and, instead, seek out opportunities for animating a collective resistance that is antithetical to neoliberal individualism (Gill, Kelan and Scharff 2017; Motta 2013). Simultaneously, it will have to be attuned to the intersectionalities of gender with, inter alia race, class, nationality and sexuality that produce inequalities between and within groups of women and men.

Apart from staging a facade of public engagement in a transformative politics, these homogenizing perspectives on gender–sexual relations have dismissed the significance of geographical particularity in that neoliberal forces do not affect every woman or sexual disident in the same way (Gregor and Grzebalska 2016; Roberts 2015). If we are to trouble ‘empowerment, choice and agency’ as superficial discourses that buttress the status quo, then we need to demonstrate clearly the uneven implementation of neoliberal policies as well as its complex outcomes (Cornwall et al. 2008; Moran 2017). Specifically, there is a dire need for more theoretically rigorous and empirically nuanced research on how ‘neoliberalized feminisms [can] provide openings to challenge oppressive power relations’ in the Global South (Prügl 2015, 627). Just as neoliberalism is a mobile ideology, researchers are aware that post-feminist and homonormative sensibilities interpellate women and sexual subjects beyond the West, yet this has not been adequately or systematically studied. Media scholars like Dosekun (2015) have argued that fine-grained studies of how post-feminism may unfold within localities can help to shed light on how ‘new’ femininities are reconstituted, especially in places where feminism clash with the vernacular culture or is deemed as a form of Westoxification. Likewise, Lazar (2006, 2009, 2011) situates the genesis of post-feminism in Western popular culture but offers a local analysis of how it is hybridized or tweaked in Singapore. This line of thought provides a ‘fertile ground for the post-feminist distancing of feminism to take root’ (Lazar 2011, 39). Moving forward, we need more of such studies that theorize post-feminism as a transnational culture that is packaged and marketed multidirectionally across borders.

Finally, we will have to work harder at rethinking the gender(ing) of globalization. On a practical level, we will also have to propel a progressive politics that not only disrupts but dissolves ‘capitalocentric conceptions’ of the economy, ones that do not dissociate work from the feminine domain (Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003, 146; Freeman 2001). One way to proceed is for further ‘feminist theorizations that see the body, nation and global as indicative of the same processes rather than as different scales, however well connected’ (Sharp 2007, 382). This may entail perceiving social reproduction/consumption to be as central to global flows as economic production, despite the latter operating on a much larger scale. Another involves a queer praxis plugged into broader calls for social moments, beyond tired debates on the pink economy or a myopic focus on only the gay/lesbian part of the LGBT spectrum. Overall, it is our contention that feminist perspectives of/on neoliberalism remain invaluable to social scientific research, without which we would have an impoverished view of how social justice may be achieved.

Notes

1 In her much-cited essay, Fraser (2013) outlines how feminism has legitimized neoliberalism and urges feminists to break off this ‘dangerous liaison’. See also Newman (2013) and Korolczuk (2016) for summaries of how Fraser’s view has been problematized.

2 ‘Lean-in feminism’ (Sandberg 2013) may be regarded as an example of faux feminism. In advocating that any woman who is willing to work hard can get to the top of the corporate ladder, it ignores the various structural obstacles that women face in their respective societies.
Key readings


References


