

Liberal Feminism

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Although feminism is quintessentially a liberal project, most contemporary feminist theorists do not call themselves liberals. Based largely on US experience, but attentive to the international context, this essay reviews the origins of feminism in liberal theory and practice and outlines the contemporary debates between liberal feminists and their feminist critics. It suggests why liberal feminism is still relevant in a globalized and increasingly contentious international system. I argue that changes in the world today raise issues that urgently require a renewed feminist commitment to liberal values and institutions.

Defining liberalism

Classical liberalism, associated with John Locke, Adam Smith, and Alexis de Toqueville, emphasizes restraints on executive power, the rule of law, the sanctity of private property and freely-made contracts, and the responsibility of individuals for their own fate (Ryan:24). Liberalism's rejection of absolutism sought to limit the arbitrary power of the state by guaranteeing individual rights and mandating the separation of powers as well as freedom of speech and of the press and assembly.

During the 19th and first half of the 20th century, industrialization, urbanization, world wars and the Depression gave rise to a modern liberalism that departed in important ways from classical liberal principles, a process that was strongly influenced by women's political activism. In the name of equality and freedom, as Alan Ryan argues, modern liberalism aimed to "emancipate individuals from the fear of hunger, unemployment, ill health and a miserable old age." The modern welfare state is expected to ameliorate the negative effects of capitalism while not rejecting it as the motor of economic growth. Liberalism has been called upon to empower groups that have been excluded from the franchise (including

women and slaves, but also the poor and illiterate). It undergirds norms that define citizenship as “freedom to” as well as “freedom from” (Berlin 2002), going beyond formal political equality to address the access to resources needed for self-realization and full citizenship (Nussbaum 2000). Liberalism is reformist rather than revolutionary, skeptical of utopianism and zealotry, yet far from hidebound; indeed, the common definition of “liberal” denotes a person or society open to new behavior or opinions and willing to discard traditional values. Liberalism’s flexibility has been tested in recent decades by the rise of identity politics and demands for group rights, expanding its commitment to tolerance, public debate and pluralism.

Feminism as a liberal project: the historical context

From its origins in the thought and writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), feminism was conceived as the application of liberal values to the status of women, protesting women’s exclusion from education; voting rights; the ability to own and manage property; and limits on the kinds of work women can do. Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) rejected Rousseau’s view that women should be excluded from the public sphere to better exercise moral suasion in the home. Women are as rational as men, she argued, and they deserve full access to education and the professions; if they are portrayed as weak, it is because they have been socialized to please men, on whom they are economically and legally dependent. Wollstonecraft introduced an important feminist criterion of freedom: women’s acts must be freely chosen (Bryson 2003).

Although Wollstonecraft’s analysis seems conventional today, at the time her liberal claims were seen as revolutionary and her personal life, which included having a child out of wedlock, was shocking. Understanding, as many later feminists did, the need for radical change to challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes, Wollstonecraft travelled to France to report on the French revolution to audiences in England. Conservatives reacted with horror, caricaturing her as a “blood-stained Amazon, the high-priestess of loose-tongued liberty” (quoted in Bryson, 15).

A second foundational feminist text, *The Subjection of Women* (1869/2007), written by John Stuart Mill and his wife Harriet Taylor (see Rossi, 1970), argued that women's oppression by men could not be justified on the basis of women's "nature," as that could hardly be known as long as women were not free. Although the Mills maintained that women's confinement to the home undermined the ideals of individual self-realization and mutual reciprocity, they did not challenge the sexual division of labor. *Subjection* argued that women should have equal political rights and access to education, but with an important distinction: women were to be granted access, not because they were equal, but because they were different.

Although *The Subjection of Women* acquired a reputation as a radical text, it was actually much more cautious than William Thompson and Anna Wheeler's pamphlet, *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race...* published in 1825, which rejected the sexual division of labor, and argued that a free society had to be based on "free love," not on the "marriage market." These points would later be taken up by Engels, and the perils of the "marriage market" were the theme of many 19th century English and American novels. The gradual imposition of Victorian values over the course of the 19th century helped rein in the challenges to the old order arising from industrialization, the expansion of the franchise and the rise of women's movements.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, women who had been excluded on the basis of their sex from participation in the World Anti-Slavery Conference in London in 1840, returned to the United States determined to organize for women's emancipation. This led to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention where, inspired by the language of the Declaration of Independence, 68 women and 32 men signed a *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* (1848/2009).¹ The document asserted that all men and women are created equal, "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." It then enumerated the many ways in which women are kept down by men. Lacking the franchise, they are subject to laws in

¹ There are also several sources online, e.g.

http://www.womensrightsfriends.org/pdfs/1848_declaration_of_sentiments.pdf.

which they have no voice; they are barred from “all profitable employments” and when employed “received but scanty remuneration”; they are silenced in church and held to be “legally dead” (under the doctrine of coverture) if married. The *Declaration* condemned patriarchy in broad but distinctively liberal terms: “He has endeavored, in every way that he could,” the document reads, “to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.” It concludes by calling for women’s “immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States.” Given the *Declaration*’s frontal attack on patriarchal power in family and economic life, it is striking that its authors debated whether to leave out women’s demand for the vote as too controversial. Seneca Falls was the first in a series of conventions; in many, African-American women were active participants (Flexner, 1974). Sojourner Truth’s famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?,” was delivered at a women’s convention in Ohio in 1851 (See Davis, 1983).

When African-American men were granted the right to vote in the United States after the Civil War, women who had fought side by side with them for universal suffrage felt betrayed. They embarked on an arduous fifty-two year campaign to gain women’s suffrage. The focus on the vote united many women but sharply narrowed the feminist agenda. By the end of the century, frustrated at every turn and influenced by the eugenics movement which had gained wide acceptance in the United States by the early decades of the 20th century, some activists resorted to racist arguments to promote their cause.

Yet that is not the full story. Many other women were drawn into the progressive movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Responding to the dramatic changes wrought by industrialization, urbanization, high levels of immigration and, ultimately, World War I, American women were active on a range of social issues, joining workers to demand labor rights, including protective legislation for women, and proposing government action to ensure the safety of the products their families consumed (Pastorello 2014; Flexner 1974). Ida Tarbell’s muckraking journalism revealed the underhanded practices of Standard Oil. Jane Addams’s work with settlement houses in Chicago responded to all of these challenges,

creating a form of “social feminism” that would have an impact on the New Deal (Sarvasy 1994). In 1921, Margaret Sanger founded the American Birth Control League (now Planned Parenthood). She opposed abortion, but fought for women’s access to contraceptives and promoted sex education as a means to emancipate working class women (Kennedy 1971; Baker 2012). Women’s organizing in this period often had a strong moral flavor, including efforts to curb the “white slave trade” and a successful campaign for a constitutional amendment to prohibit alcohol production and sales, in force from 1920 to 1933.

During those same decades, drawn together by women’s efforts in many countries to improve their legal status and obtain the vote, by their opposition to the First World War, and by the desire to have some influence in the newly formed League of Nations, American women helped form several international women’s federations (Berkovitch 2002). Jane Addams played a leadership role in what became the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, with headquarters today in Switzerland and 76,000 members in 120 countries. The Soroptimists claim 95,000 members in 125 countries and Zonta International, a female counterpart to the Rotary Club, 31,000 members in 65 countries. The campaign for the vote became more heated as US women, led by Alice Paul, adopted more the more disruptive tactics of the Pankhursts in England; their arrests and hunger strikes gained national attention. Women finally won the vote in 1920, a victory brought about as much by sea change in public attitudes toward women’s roles during the First World War as by the campaign itself.

After decades of intense political involvement, US women’s overall levels of political activism declined in the 1920s, although their entry into the professional labor force increased. The typewriter opened new career paths, while the percentage of women among those receiving PhDs in the United States was higher in the 1920s than in any subsequent decade until the 1980s. As the Depression moved liberalism to the left in the 1930s, a space was created for policies drawn from earlier experiences with social feminism. Like Keynesian economics, these reforms were implemented to remake rather replace capitalism. President Franklin Roosevelt named Frances Perkins, the first female cabinet member in US history, as Secretary of Labor. She served from 1933 to

1945 and was responsible for carrying out many New Deal initiatives that established a greater role for the state, including social security, the Works Projects Administration, and the National Labor Relations Board. Women, who had identified since the Civil War with the party of Lincoln, began to shift toward the Democrats, while the Republicans began their gradual but seemingly inexorable move to the right.

Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR's wife, broke all expectations about the appropriate role for a first lady, becoming a major political figure in her own right. She was a strong proponent of the United Nations and a standard-bearer for international human rights. But as men returned from WWII, social expectations shifted once again. Women who had been employed in men's jobs during the war left the labor force, some voluntarily, others not. The GI Bill provided access to education, but almost entirely for men. Economic prosperity in post-war America meant a growing middle class; the social ideal was a family with two or three children, a working husband and a stay-at-home wife in a house in the suburbs. By the 1950s, "feminism" appeared to be an antiquated cause of the past.

The contemporary feminist movement in the United States burst forth in 1963 with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's liberal feminist call to action, avidly read by women in the United States and Britain, described the malaise of the well-educated, underemployed suburban housewife as the "problem without a name." The solution was for women to leave their "comfortable concentration camps" to seek fulfillment outside of the home. Along with the 1963 report from the John F. Kennedy's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, which documented the many ways in which women were denied basic legal rights and discriminated against (Costain 1994), Friedan's attack on the "mystique that enslaves" led to a new period of activism and feminist theorizing. The passage of the Equal Pay Act (1963), and the almost accidental inclusion of the word sex in Title VII (prohibiting employment discrimination) of 1964 Civil Rights Act, was followed by the formation of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, in large part to press for the implementation of Title VII. NOW declared that its mission was "to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of

American society *now*, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in a truly equal partnership with men” (Bryson, p. 142).

In the United States, feminists were successful at bringing about many reforms, including laws mandating equal access for women to education, credit, housing and jobs (Tinker 1983), and in state-by state organizing of an ultimately unsuccessful campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution (Mansbridge 1986). But liberal feminism soon came under attack, not only from those on the right opposed to “women’s lib,” but also from the left, as theorists like Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Zillah Eisenstein (1978), who had come from the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, combined feminist critiques of patriarchy with a Marxist critique of capitalism. During the late 1960s, to be a “radical” feminist was to be a Marxist, inspired by revolutionary movements in the “Third World,” particularly China and Cuba. By the mid-1970s, however, the term “radical” feminism in the United States increasingly came to mean lesbian feminism, as activists attacked NOW’s initial unwillingness to advocate for gay rights for fear of losing public support (Echols 1989). Lesbian feminists argued for the moral superiority of women’s values and against “sleeping with the enemy.” As these debates raged, mainstream feminism was strongly criticized failing to take race into account.²

During the 1980s, the economic failures of communist command economies became more evident and “real existing socialism” proved less emancipatory for women than its ideals proclaimed. Marxism lost its appeal and post-modern and post-colonial theorists, often explicitly hostile to liberal notions of universalism and individualism, nudged feminist theory in new directions (Nicholson 1990). Women’s movements in the West were also influenced by the UN Decade for Women (1975-85), which brought an unprecedented international mobilization of women, but also a resistance to what was seen as a Western liberal over-emphasis on political and civil rights. The UN General Assembly, its membership

² For first-hand accounts of the feminist movement in the United States, see Tobias (1998), S. Evans (1980); hooks (1984). For documents, see Baxandall and Gordon (2001).

greatly expanded by decolonization and reflecting the demands of the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement, called for a New International Economic Order (Murphy 1982). In 1975, with most UN member countries under authoritarian rule, the discussion of women's political participation and civil rights was muted. Many from the North who attended the parallel non-governmental meeting were taken aback when challenged by "Third World" women who insisted that Northern exploitation of the economies of the South was as fundamental as patriarchy to the oppression of women (Winston 1995).

In the United States, from the mid-1970s on, criticism of mainstream US feminism as "white" and "middle class" raised awareness that "women" could not be considered a homogenous group with a clearly defined set of shared interests and that white women themselves needed to take responsibility for their roles in perpetuating institutional racist discrimination. Angela Davis (1983), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), and bell hooks (2000) criticized the lack of attention to the experiences of African-American women, while Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's edited collection of essays, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), brought new perspectives from chicana feminists.³ The terms "intersectionality"—recognizing the relationship between the multiple sources of women's oppression—and "group rights" entered feminist discourse (Young 1990).

Feminist critiques of liberalism

The intense debates within the US women's movement and the growing influence of feminist postmodern and postcolonial theories challenged liberal assumptions that had guided feminist epistemologies and strategies from the 18th to the mid-20th century. Critics focused on some key issues: the founding myth of the social contract; liberal acceptance of the separation of the public and private spheres; the liberal tendency to define the "individual" as male; and liberalism's reliance on an "abstract" epistemology. Although they came from different positions, critics agreed that a feminism drawn from liberalism was not radical enough to leverage the changes needed to address gender injustice.

³ Guides to these debates include Tong (1989) and J. Evans (1995).

Carole Pateman (1988), analyzing the work of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, identified the exclusion of women from the social contract as liberalism's foundational flaw. In her view, liberalism's origin story—that political authority is established by consent via a contract among equals who give up some of their natural rights in order to gain security—failed to recognize that the social contract not only excluded women but legitimized their domestic and sexual subjection (for critiques, see Jaquette 1998 and Jones 1992). Pateman goes further: because contracts fail to take into account power differences between the contracting parties, no society based on contract can be just. Contracts simply disguise coercion as consent. In dialogue with Pateman, Charles Mills (2008) distinguishes the “ideal contract” of liberal theory with the “domination contract” of liberal practice that hides and thereby perpetuates both racism and sexism. In Jane Mansbridge's succinct summary, “In a world of actual unfreedom, the liberal emphasis on free individuals makes the theory itself the bearer of subordination” (2008, p. 27). This “anti-Enlightenment” position is reinforced by the fact that during much of the 19th century, the English common law doctrine of coverture prevailed, subsuming women's legal personhood into that of their husbands, and allowing men to “discipline” women as they saw fit, on the grounds that they were legally responsible for their wives' behavior (Stretton and Kesselring 2013).

Pateman's position reflects the broader feminist concern about the separation of the public and the domestic spheres. Marxist feminists added an economic dimension: as industrialization separated work from the household, the gap between public and private grew wider, and women became even more dependent on men. Historically, liberals tended to see women's economic exploitation (as factory workers or as prostitutes) as social problems, but not as evidence of much larger issues raised by capitalism.

Contemporary feminist critics point out that, in accepting the abstract individualism of liberal theory, egalitarian feminists were in fact endorsing a male model of citizenship. Qualities often associated with women, such as the importance of emotion and intuition, cooperation and compassion, are devalued in favor of traits ascribed to men, such as rationality and competitiveness. Further, they noted, legislating equality can produce very negative outcomes for

women, as in the case of “no fault” divorce, which left women much poorer than men, or by assuming that women (or other marginalized groups) can compete in a male world without affirmative action, although such policies appear to contradict the liberal norm of equal treatment (but see Minow, 1990).

Many early “second wave” feminists had imagined a future of androgynous gender relations (with both men and women able to think and behave in ways conventionally assigned to each sex through gender socialization). “Difference” feminists, however, emphasized the importance of bringing women’s values to what they saw as an excessively masculinized public sphere. Carole Gilligan’s influential *In a Different Voice* (1982) argued that gender differences in moral reasoning should not be interpreted as evidence that girls were less mature than boys because they addressed moral questions in interpersonal rather than abstract terms. In her view, girls (and by extension women) were acting on an “ethic of care” rather than an abstract and rule-bound “ethic of rights.” Joan Tronto (1993) would later explore the implications of care “as a political ideal and a political strategy.” Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar (1992) argued that “traditional” ethics overrates culturally masculine traits like “independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, productivity, asceticism, war, and death,” while it underrates culturally feminine traits like “interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, body, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life.”

Other feminist theorists weighed in. Jean Elshtain (1981) defended Rousseau’s position that women could best impact public life by creating a moral environment in the family. In “Antigone’s Daughters” (1982), Elshtain harshly criticized the “bureaucratic” state and the selfish, competitive norms of the public sphere, too permeated by the market values of corporate culture. “Maternal” feminists, such as Sara Ruddick (1995) argued that motherhood provides rich experiences and is a source of values superior to those of liberal feminists who mistakenly urge women to leave home to join the male “rat race.”

Finally, critics attacked liberal feminism's reliance on "abstract individualism" on epistemological grounds. Because they begin from the assumption that it is "the needs and interests of individuals that are primary," Lisa Schwartzman argues, "liberals have a difficult time detecting and analyzing cases of oppression," particularly so when the oppressed are members of a group (2006, p. 7).

Others noted liberalism's epistemological debts to the scientific Enlightenment, which developed, as Sandra Harding (1986) has shown, with a male bias. Ann Tickner finds the empirical methods used by contemporary international relations specialists similarly hobbled, linking the field's "empiricist" methods to a recognizably "Hobbesian" interpretation of the liberal tradition. The field rests "on a conception of human nature that is radically individualistic, whereby human beings are conceived of as isolated individuals with no necessary connection with each other" (2001, pp 12-13). Nancy Hartsock, criticizing the social sciences for studying what is rather than what could be, proposed "standpoint feminism," which reclaims women's lives and experiences of oppression as important forms of knowledge that challenge rather than reinforce the status quo (1999). Eco-feminists condemned the rational instrumentalism of Enlightenment science, which separates man from nature and body from mind, undermining women's traditional sources of power while exploiting nature with potentially catastrophic consequences for the planet (e.g. Merchant 1988).

Liberal feminists reply

Liberal feminism has not lacked defenders, with Susan Moller Okin (1991), Martha Nussbaum (2007) and Jean Hampton (2001) notable among them. Okin and Nussbaum engaged in an extensive dialogue with John Rawls, whose *The Theory of Justice* (1971) revived social contract liberalism and renewed interest in liberal theory and its capacity to address contemporary issues.

Critics argue that because it assumes "equality" among the contractors, the liberal notion of the "social contract" cannot see or address the structural causes of inequality. Rawls confronts this by suggesting that contract-making individuals in the "original position" must operate behind a "veil of ignorance." They must devise the rules that govern them all by empathetically putting themselves in the

position of the most vulnerable, in order to address the structural sources of inequality (such as race, poverty, disability or gender). Charles Mills also defends a potentially positive relationship between contracting and justice. Contracting can be “appropriated to emancipatory ends” by identifying the gaps between the ideal contract that assumes equality and consent and the actual social and political arrangements under which we live (2008, p. 70).

On the public/private distinction, Susan Okin proposes that the classical division be abandoned and that liberal principles be applied to family relations. Always emphasizing that women themselves must choose, she argues for women’s engagement in work outside the home on the grounds that economic dependence is disempowering and that women’s acceptance of this reinforces male power legally, domestically and psychologically. Okin sees the gendered division of labor in the family as patently unjust: men and women should share domestic work and be equally involved in parenting. Egalitarian households are more likely than patriarchal ones to produce citizens who treat each other as free and equal individuals, as the liberal polity requires (see Abbey: 35).

In US law, the “domestic” (understood as “privacy”) has been deployed on both sides of legal arguments involving women’s rights. After the Civil War, a commonly heard case against giving women the vote was that it would open “the sacred circle of the family” to the “intrusion of politics and politicians” (Lepore, 2015, p. 36). On the other hand, the US Supreme Court has drawn on privacy arguments to allow sales of contraceptives and to declare state and local sodomy laws unconstitutional. The Court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade* granting women the right to abortion was also justified on privacy grounds, despite the fact that there is no explicit right to privacy in the US Constitution. Anti-abortion forces have successfully chipped away at women’s reproductive rights, and feminists fear that the privacy argument may not hold much longer against the “rights”-based arguments of abortion opponents. Jill Lepore (2015) points out that, by contrast, gay marriage, until recently viewed very negatively by the American public, is now widely accepted; and legal arguments defending gay rights have largely been based on fairness, not privacy.

Are critics correct in arguing that liberal feminists have adopted the conventional, i.e. male, view of the individual? In one sense, yes. There is no doubt that liberal feminists want women to have access to the many opportunities and resources available to men. Rather than envisioning the individual as male, however, many liberal feminists have favored androgyny—not, as some have argued, as an ideal composite combining the “best” qualities of men and women, but as allowing individuals to choose among behavioral, career and even “gender performance” options across the human spectrum. The intent was to make gender, in Okin’s words, “as irrelevant as eye color.” Androgyny has been largely dismissed and has virtually disappeared as a topic of debate since the 1970s, but is now being rethought as transgender groups have brought their perspectives into public discourse, as Carol Heilbrun over thirty years ago speculated would happen (Heilbrun, 1980).

As difference feminist arguments became more influential, egalitarian feminists worried that the gains for women’s rights, claimed under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, would be jeopardized (but see Minow, 1990). Without denying the importance of maternal values or the ethic of care, liberal feminists labeled difference arguments “essentialist,” and maintained that difference feminism reinforces the traditional gender division of labor. Further, if care work is a social good, they reasoned, it should be shared by all members of society.

Responding to Gilligan’s view that women’s moral judgments are valuable because they emphasize interpersonal relationships, not abstract rules, Jean Hampton urged that liberal contract theory be applied to interpersonal relationships, such as the relationship between care-givers and those who are dependent on them. Concerned that women all too often assume the burdens of care on the grounds of love or duty, she writes, “a genuine moral agent has to have a good sense of her own moral claims if she is going to be a person at all and thus a real partner in a morally sound relationship. She must also have some sense of what it is to make a legitimate claim if she is to understand and respond to the legitimate claims of others...” (Hampton 2001, quoted in Abbey 2008, p. 126). In Hampton’s view, the contract approach encourages women to value

themselves in a society that undervalues them. Without the clarity of contract theory, women internalize social norms and take on the burdens of care unaided. Hampton brings care work into sharp focus, recognizing the costs and benefits to caregivers as well as the dignity and moral autonomy of those who are dependent on care. It suggests the need to greatly expand the social support and material rewards for care work, and the importance of having men as well as women take responsibility for care. By contrast, a social feminist approach runs the risk of privatizing care and leaving it to women to perform as their moral—and feminist—duty.

Hampton's analysis brings us back the recurring issue of whether women's decisions are truly based on consent. Ann Cudd observes that "women often face incentives through social structure to choose ways of life that will further their oppression." But this is not coercion in the usual sense of the term, she maintains, because women are acting rationally, given their incentives (Cudd 2004, p. 47), an argument similar to Deniz Kandiyoti's that women everywhere make "patriarchal bargains" (Kandiyoti 1988). The issue of whether women consent to practices that liberal feminists view as oppressive is a complex question, however, and I return to it below.

Liberal feminism and international political economy

Many of the issues engaged by liberal feminism emerged from—and continue to respond to—processes of social change that can best be understood from the standpoint of international political economy. Wollstonecraft was motivated to write by the French Revolution. The Seneca Falls convention grew out of the political response to slavery and the slave trade. Jane Addams' settlement house movement was a response to the globalization of her age, including the impact of economic migration. And contemporary US feminism arose in part because of US prosperity in the 1950s, which provided space for marginalized groups including blacks and women, to make claims to full citizenship, while the US role as an anti-communist superpower provided the catalyzing shocks of the Cold War, including Cuba and Vietnam.

The post World War II period, with its defeat of fascism and the West's competition with the Soviet Union, solidified a set of international institutions based on liberal principles and espousing liberal values, including the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT, now the World Trade Organization), as well as the United Nations, committed to equal political representation, human rights and the rule of law. The fall of the Soviet Union, the dismantling of the Soviet bloc and the so-called "Third Wave" of democratization (Huntington 1999), led to a series of UN sponsored conferences that further entrenched these liberal norms while reinforcing the modern liberal commitment to addressing economic inequalities and providing social safety nets.

Within that environment, women/gender and development programs operate from the liberal principle of individual empowerment, and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), as well as the national commitments that emerged from the Decade for Women and Beijing, reflect liberal egalitarian goals (Meyer and Prugl 1999) while also recognizing that women have practical as well as strategic gender interests (Molyneux 1985), and that differences among women must be taken into account.

Yet there are several obvious areas of tension. Individual "contracts" are not very relevant to women who live in societies where communal traditions and family honor are dominant norms, for example, and where gender equality is not widely accepted as a goal in practice, even where the state is formally committed to it.

Efforts to encourage women to claim their rights on a global scale must face some key questions: is the liberal feminist analysis of women's subjection meaningful in other contexts? Does feminist liberalism provide an appropriate model of justice for countries with very different values and traditions? Do outside pressures for gender equality make conditions worse for women in societies where gender discrimination is the norm? In the confrontation between communism and capitalism, women's equality was accepted as a goal by both sides. Today, the

rejection of women's equality is an ideological watchword of jihadism, and symbolically and emotionally central to its appeal.

Of the many issues liberal feminism must address as it advocates for women's rights worldwide, two seem both fundamentally important and vexing. Are liberal—and liberal feminist—values universalizable? And how should feminists respond to attacks on “neoliberalism,” the form in which the contemporary interplay between liberalism and capitalism is being played out?

Martha Nussbaum (and Amartya Sen) defend the position that liberal values are universal, that the desire for freedom and dignity are not limited by culture. They propose a “human capabilities approach” to development and justice: women (and men) must have ten “capabilities,” including life, bodily integrity, and control over one's political and material environment (Nussbaum, 2000). An influential counter-argument is found in Chandra Mohanty's anti-colonial “Under Western Eyes” (1984), which criticizes Western feminists for portraying women in the global south as victims of patriarchy and for failing to recognize the voices and agency of Third World women. Using veiling as an example of women making a political statement, she challenges feminists to better understand phenomena they too easily label as signs of women's oppression. Anne Phillips (1992) emphasizes the radical and participatory advantages to be had from starting from assumptions of heterogeneity rather than universality.

Okin's “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” (1999) asked whether minorities living in Western cultures should be granted “group rights” to engage in illiberal practices, such as clitorrectomy, honor killings and forced marriage, and, if so, where to draw the line. She invoked the feminist liberal position: “women should not be disadvantaged by their sex,...they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and...they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and freely chosen lives as men have” (quoted in Abbey 2011, p. 84).

Okin's article set off a firestorm of criticism. She was attacked for judging other cultures by their practices but judging her own by its ideals, for stereotyping, and for failing to recognize women's voices and women's agency within other cultural traditions. Although her focus was the treatment of cultural minority groups

within Western societies, the broader question of how to address the conflict between liberal values and cultural practices that liberals view as oppressive to women—and may have negative material consequences for women in terms of health, education, and even survival—remains a serious issue for feminists in both North and South, traditional and cosmopolitan.

In defending veiling under certain circumstances, Mohanty was in fact defending an important liberal principle: women who choose to veil are exercising choice. Many women do accept and defend cultural traditions that liberals find oppressive, and their voices also need to be heard. Women may willingly choose to follow traditional practices to insure their culture is not destroyed and/or to resist globalization and Western domination, as post-colonial and decolonial feminists make clear. The defense of veiling provides an example of what liberals can learn from this kind of interchange. But, as Nancy Hirschmann points out, the “choosing” to veil is not necessarily a sign of women’s agency, and women are being forced in conflicting directions by “frameworks constructed by men.... Assertions of national identity are at least as much reactive as they are proactive,” she concludes, and “efforts to ‘reclaim’ an uncorrupted and precolonized past seek something that never actually existed” (2008: 177-179). Under these circumstances, when does “choice” become coercion?

Anne Phillips, looking at forced marriage among South Asian communities in Britain, takes a different view. Failing to hold minority groups living within Western societies to liberal standards may be viewed as condescending, as Okin argues, but calling decisions made by women in these communities “coerced” denies their agency when a full account of the various factors that go into a woman’s decision often provides firm evidence of active consent (Phillips 2008, pp. 109-110). Given the attack on liberal individualism, it is ironic that this defense of women’s agency takes place at the individual level. Liberal feminists would undoubtedly respond that patriarchal *structures* severely constrain these women’s options. As feminists continue to think this through, they must also be wary when the “mistreatment” of women is used to support intervention, as the George W. Bush administration did to justify the invasion of Afghanistan or to

delegitimize the rights of indigenous minorities, as some national governments have done.

“Neoliberalism” has now become the acceptable epithet to avoid having to take on the broader issue of the relationship between feminism and capitalism. From the early 19th century to the present, the question of whether capitalism facilitates or undermines women’s rights has been part of the feminist debate. The terms changed, however, when China turned to market capitalism to promote economic growth and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, eliminating the hope for a viable socialist economic model. In the 1980s, the global debt crisis gave the Reagan and Thatcher administrations the leverage to promote market reforms domestically and internationally. These reforms reduced the role of the state, opened economies to trade and foreign investment, and lauded individual entrepreneurial initiative. It soon became clear, however, that “structural adjustment” programs had very negative consequences, especially for poor women and their families, in the developed North as well as the more vulnerable South. Programs designed to control inflation by limiting government expenditures to match government revenues required cutting social programs, although the US and British-inspired attack on the state more broadly had further negative (and avoidable) effects. Newly popular microcredit programs increased demands on women, emphasizing “entrepreneurship” without addressing structural inequalities. In response, many feminists around the world have joined forces with anti-globalization and environmental movements to resist “neoliberal” development strategies.

Yet the critique of neoliberalism does not add up, as its proponents might want, to an effective critique of capitalism per se. India’s liberalized economy has produced renewed economic growth, while China’s success in adopting market mechanisms led to a dramatic improvement in the material welfare of millions of Chinese. Asian demand for primary products produced a “commodities boom” that spurred growth—and redistribution—in many countries, particularly in Latin America but also in Africa.

Radical feminist economists have criticized the concept of individuals as “economic men” in ways similar to those used by critics of liberal individualism (e.g. Elson 2003; Folbre 2001). On the whole, however, feminist theorists have been less engaged with economic issues than with debates over identity politics, intersectionality and “performance.” They reject economic “globalization” without offering real alternatives, while celebrating the transnational opportunities for building movements that globalization provides.

But as feminists themselves engage in anti-state as well as anti-liberal polemics, they weaken the voices defending liberal democracy. The greatest threat to democracy today, and to the effective expansion of women’s rights, comes not from fundamentalisms but from the decline in public support for liberal political institutions and the rise of populism on the left as well as the right. Far from defending unfettered markets, liberal feminists are well aware that women’s lives depend both on access to markets and on effective states capable of providing safety nets, environmental and consumer regulations and security. Women have gained greater representation, but legislatures are being undermined across the globe by corruption and rising authoritarianism. Liberal feminism remains out of fashion, and its rejection of utopianism makes it an unlikely source of revolutionary dreams. But all feminists have a stake in and a role to play in keeping liberal institutions alive and liberal values on the agenda.

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