

Feminism and the Free Market: Does Liberty Entail Liberation?

When I was invited to come and speak here I was a little apprehensive as I am not very well versed in political theory. I did one module on the History or Political Thought during my first degree – but I missed many lectures and my sole revision consisted of reading a book called “From Plato to Nato” – I didn’t do very well.

However when I started reading about Liberalism and even Libertarianism and Hayek and Adam Smith I had that feeling of ‘where have you been all my life?’. So ideas such as minimal government intervention, a free market where the interests of society are promoted through individuals pursuing their own interests, and to a slightly more considered degree the rights of the individual – these are all things which I value highly.

I think that one of the reasons that I was so pleasantly surprised by my reading of liberalism was because I had come to understand it through the lens of liberal feminism. Liberal feminists seem to measure freedom in terms of equality of outcome and far from believing in minimal state intervention they rely on state intervention to ensure that equality is obtained. In practice it seems to me liberalism and feminism could not be more strongly opposed.

It is this lack of fit between liberalism and feminism which is going to be the focus of my talk. I am going to argue not only that liberty, liberalism the free market will not lead to feminism, but also that feminist outcomes i.e. the ‘feminist’ liberation this panel is interested in, will not lead to liberty.

However the relationship is complex so I just want to iron out some of the complexities first.

To what extent does feminism support the free market?

I think it is helpful to distinguish between feminist ideologies and feminist outcomes. There have been some blatant conspiracy theories about the links between capitalism and feminism (ever heard the one about feminism being funded by Rockefeller?) and whilst conspiracy theories can be discredited they often point to interesting relationships which need to be explored. So there have been some quite interesting arguments suggesting that feminist ideologies become most vigorous and fertile when we need to increase the size of the labour force. The Mid 19 Century, post ww1 Britain and the 1960s have been seen as such periods

and I think the current period epitomises this approach. The government is pouring money into various essentially feminist projects and this is bearing fruit in an apparent improvement in our employment statistics.

However on closer examination most of the evidence supporting the impact of feminist interventions on the free market turn out to be highly ideological. For example when looking at Return on Investment Studies I didn't actually find one which had counted the costs of implementing the interventions. Similarly studies to support increasing the numbers of women on boards tend to conflate correlation with causality whilst the longitudinal studies which can prove causality suggest that in terms of financial performance, increasing the number of women on boards has a negative effect.

There also seems to be some law of unintended consequences going on if we look at labour force statistics. Far from a scenario of growth we have one of replacement with increases in female employment being accompanied by decreases in male employment and increases in male levels of inactivity. And as we know women are much more likely to work part-time so it is conceivable that the overall impact of female employment could be having a negative effect.

So in terms of the idea that feminist interventions support the free market – I think the jury ought to still be out.

Does the free market support feminism?

Next I would like to look at the extent to which a free-market supports feminism. The extent of feminist intervention, at all levels of society, endless funding to promote equality in sports, in business, in the numbers of female professors, flexible employment and so on suggests that I am not alone in thinking that a genuinely free market is highly unlikely to achieve feminist outcomes.

The difference of course between myself and the feminists is that I think this is no bad thing.

And indeed if we look at freely made individual choices of men and women we can see that they are unlikely to fulfil feminist aims. Where paternity leave is transferable as for example it was in Canada it was women who chose to take most of this leave. When the leave became non-transferable uptake of male paternity leave went up to 50% however this was not because the fathers wanted to play an equal role in baby care. Rather research showed that the fathers took the leave either to

support the mother, look after the other children, or simply because the mother expected him too.

When we turn to women the message is even more clear. Survey after survey [netmums, Elle, The Resolution Foundation, British Social Attitudes, Opportunity Now] shows that mothers are keen to maintain the lead role in the family. The “outstanding stability” of maternal responsibility has not seen a real shift in the pattern of gendered roles even where women have equal or greater participation in paid employment. Feminists still try to attribute this to deeply ingrained processes of socialisation and cultural construction, but as mothers are starting to protest at the way their role is not being taken seriously I think feminist explanations are wearing a little thin. Sociologists are getting closer to the truth here as they start to acknowledge how our concepts of the abstract individual are actually very powerfully mediated by the fact that we live within a male or female body. Processes of pregnancy, birth and lactation result in an incredibly strong bond being created between the mother and child and research shows that even the most dedicated full-time fathers recognise that their parental role is secondary to that. Sociologists talk about “embodiment”. But all you really need is common sense.

Women are prioritizing (theoretically at least – in practice we so often have to go out to work) motherhood not because they are stuck in dull less rewarding jobs. They are choosing dull less rewarding jobs precisely because they prioritise motherhood.

And this results in very high levels of occupational segregation in precisely those countries which have managed to get a lot of women out to work. For example a comprehensive, cross-national comparative study of occupational sex segregation was carried out over ten years by the ILO. The findings showed that the level of occupational segregation in Nordic countries was higher than in other OECD countries, higher than in Egypt and higher than in many Asian countries too. Where women are under pressure to work, employment far from being the preserve of the most committed, public spirited, inspirational, imaginative or ambitious women becomes the burden of many less careerist women who would really rather be looking after their family and therefore willingly choose the less demanding forms of work.

So a free market will not lead to feminist outcomes largely because feminism is an elite ideology which has ignored how so many ordinary women feel.

Does feminist 'Liberation' lead to Liberty?

Finally what I would like to consider is the extent to which feminist liberation furthers the cause of liberty itself.

I don't think it does for a number of different reasons.

Firstly as a result of feminist policies women are now feeling under enormous pressure to go out to work. This is reflected in the rise of genuine grass roots movement like Mothers at Home Matter, made up of women who feel that they have to campaign in order to have the right to stay at home and look after their children.

Feminist policies are the cause of this. At the most benign level there are now a lot of two income, higher earner families and this reflects the interests of elite women who have chosen to prioritise work. This is entirely fair and it is absolutely right that women who want to should be able to do so, but, that does increase the pressure on everyone else.

This is greatly worsened by government policies, which perhaps in keeping with the idea of trying to get rid of the male breadwinner tax everyone as individuals regardless of their family position. This results in a very unfair situation where for example a household with two single income earners on £30 grand each will pay £6,500 less in tax annually than a single earner on an income of £60,000 whose wife stays at home. And with childcare benefits the government discrimination against single income families doesn't stop there.

These highly interventionist tax policies are not only making it very difficult for women to exercise choice in terms of whether they go to work and how much they work etc. They are also having a very serious impact on our private lives. When the government gives benefits they take into consideration the income of both parties. But when they tax they don't. This results in a situation where 95% of all single people would incur a couple penalty if they married or started living together as a couple and where families would be a lot better off if they separated. Basically if a family stays together the main provider is caught in a tax trap and does not escape it until salaries of about £38,000. If he were to live apart from his family the mother could access benefits as a lone parent with children and he could escape the tax trap at a much lower income.

Liberation is also having a negative impact on men. Data by Kirstine Hansen shows that low waged female employment does have an impact on low waged male employment ultimately leading to increases in rates of

male crime. Factor into this an on-going drive to increase female employment in all areas with measures including 'positive action. Target setting, mentoring and an awful lot of funds. And factor into this an education system where the number of boys taking A levels is smaller than the number of girls by 20%(and more girls get good A levels), and where the number of women graduates exceeds the number of men in science based subjects by 8% and in non science based subjects by 58%. And that absolutely nothing is done about this.

All this leads to increases in rates of male unemployment particularly in the younger age groups and a dearth of educated, decently earning and motivated men.

Feminists don't see a good reason to be interested in men however perhaps they should. For while privileged women have the full benefits of stable marriages and families less well off women are much more likely to be single parents or to be in relationships which fall apart. And if you talk to these women a large part of this is about the shortage of dependable decently earning men. Ultimately ignoring the interests of the other half of the human race will have a serious impact on women themselves.

Finally of course high levels of female employment and single parenthood has a very detrimental impact on children – our future – who are deprived of all the benefits of a proper family life.

To sum up

To sum up. For me the whole feminist project appears to have been about trampling the most basic liberal principles of non-government intervention into the ground. The damage which this has produced also provides the clearest evidence of why this should not be done.

Liberalism is an amazing tool for achieving freedom and fairness and I would argue that some of the most useful achievements of feminism – equal access to employment for married women, property rights, getting rid of the stigma of illegitimacy, making divorce viable all of these things could have been achieved within a liberal framework without arguments about patriarchy and the enmity created towards men.

How would I move the liberal project forward?

I very much like Adam Smith's invisible hand construct but an awful lot of what individuals do is motivated not just by their own self-interest but by

their interest in their family. I would like to see liberal theory developed in a way which took family motivations on board.

Likewise our understanding of freedom. All too often we understand freedom in terms of our ability to participate in employment, or politics or expressions of individual sexuality. We need to understand that the very relations i.e those of the family which are often seen as being a drag on freedom can actually promote it.

I think we need to re-think representative democracy. What is important is not the number of women in Parliament rather it is that the interests of our families and local communities – those things which actually make our life really worth living – that these interests have proper representation in parliament. This has little to do with the number of women there – these often appear to be women who have no real family experience at all. Rather it depends on having a strong private realm with people committing time and energy to it and channels of communication between this private realm and government. I think one way of doing this could perhaps be something like Neil Lyndon's idea of a family union. And as a researcher an important dimension is I feel the role of attitudinal research.

Finally we need to re-think inequality. Inequality tends to be viewed as a very negative thing and indeed where inequality leads to some kind of human suffering it is. However the problem is the human suffering not the inequality. *I think we need to examine the possibility that a great deal of what we view as inequality and therefore as problematic is actually simply difference and therefore not.*