

Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body*, Polity Press: Cambridge, 2014; 208 pp.: 9780745648873

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*The Politics of the Body* is a meticulously researched, evocatively written and timely intervention in a series of critical feminist debates about the body. In each successive chapter, Alison Phipps tackles the complex and ostensibly contradictory positions taken by various feminist and 'political Left' activists and academics in relation to a different theme: sexual violence, gender and Islam, the sex industry, and dominant contemporary reproductive discourses about natural childbirth and 'breast is best'.

Phipps argues convincingly that behind the seemingly incommensurate positions in these debates there are, in fact, significant affinities, namely their resonance with neoconservative and neoliberal agendas, normative subjectivities and related political and economic structures. Taking the case of the sex industry as an example, Phipps documents the rise of 'sex radicalism' as the dominant framework employed by academics and 'sex positive' feminists. Whilst this position arose from feminist concerns about sexual freedom and self-expression in the 1970s and 1980s, its current preoccupations have much in common with neoliberalism's concern with individual empowerment and self-creation, 'sexualized consumer culture' (p. 133), and instrumental economic calculations of choice. As a result sex positive positions lead to the valorization of sex work for its flexibility and financial reward without attending to the deeply classed and racialized nature of the industry. The most available alternative to the 'sex positive' position is radical feminism, likewise critiqued for its resonances with neoconservative sexual moralism and collaboration with authoritarian 'law and order' systems. Both the neoconservative position and the 'answering tendency' (p. 133) towards neoliberalism, however, take the structures of global capitalism as a given and uncontested terrain.

In contradistinction, the analysis in *The Politics of the Body* is explicitly rooted in Nancy Fraser's (2009) call for a reclamation of anti-capitalist analysis in the face of a 'dangerous liaison' (following Eisenstein, 2005) between feminism and neoliberalism. It is here that I find Phipps's development of Fraser's hypothesis bypasses an important question, one that is posed by Fraser (2009: 107) at the start of her controversial article 'Feminism, capitalism and the cunning of history': is it 'coincidence' or 'affinity' that has led to the 'thriving' of 'second wave feminism' as a cultural force at the same time as the growing neoliberalization of the global political economy? The answer(s) to this question has significance both analytically and for the radical activism which both Phipps and Fraser are eager to engender.

The relationship between various feminist analyses and neoliberalism and neoconservatism is articulated in Phipps's book in a variety of ways: 'resonances', 'influences', 'associations', 'drawing on', 'playing into', 'coherence', 'co-optation' and even 'complicity'. The reason to belabour these terms is to highlight that the response to Fraser's question is fairly oblique and somewhat slippery in *The Politics of the Body*. In some places Phipps seems to suggest that feminist demands have been *taken up and politically neutralized* when they are articulated as part of neoliberal and neoconservative agendas. For instance, she argues that earlier feminist calls for natural childbirth were aimed at both empowering women via control over their reproductive capacities and challenging the profit-driven and masculinist medical establishment. However, in this neoliberal moment, such demands have increasingly been taken up in normalizing frames which regulate and even penalize women when they do not conform to the resource-intensive practices of neoliberal 'healthism' with their marketized services and commodity-driven practices. A second formulation offered in the book is that feminist analyses and demands have been *modified* because of neoliberalism. This can be seen in the example above of the shift from calls for women's rights to sexual freedom to sex radicalism.

A third version of the argument is that feminism and the 'political Left' more broadly have *contributed to the rise of neoliberalism or at very least helped to legitimize it*. Phipps's argument in relation to gender and Islam goes the furthest in proposing that feminism has a position of complicity. Here she suggests that the 'Western' feminist response to neoconservatism, in keeping with anxieties related to being labelled a 'colonial feminist' intent on 'rescuing' Muslim women, has been a reluctance to moralize and a valorization of difference. In so doing, feminism has contributed to neoliberalism's individual psychologization of political critique, 'inhibited analysis of practices such as honour killings as cross-cultural forms of gender-based oppression' (p. 74), and – somewhat paradoxically – provided justifications for inaction in the face of fundamentalist and gender oppressive forms of Islam (as well as similar strands of Christianity).

The first two formulations suggest that a core set of progressive feminist demands need to be reclaimed, the first from neoliberalism and the second from itself. The third, however, indicates that there is something problematic in feminism, at least in its current iterations, such that its fundamental tenets buttress or advance the spread of both neoliberalism and neoconservatism. If we accept this argument of complicity, we need seriously to consider whether feminism (either partially or wholly) can be considered a progressive force – a question which Fraser poses but Phipps largely bypasses in her discussion. Instead, Phipps's conclusions begin from the assumption that feminism is indeed both desirable and necessary, but in a reinvigorated form.

To be clear, I am certainly in agreement with her conclusion that feminist insights and activism remain crucial. My point is that more precision is needed. It is not enough to cite resonances between feminism and neoliberalism; there is a need to consider the character of these affinities and the ways they operate, as well as the nature of discontinuities between the two, and the resultant implications for the types of claims we can make. In part this is a point about analytic exactness. But, more importantly, this is about what those committed to social and economic justice should make of feminism as an intellectual project and political movement. There may be points where feminist analyses are 'complicit' with neoliberalism and neoconservatism, requiring an imaginative rethinking of analysis and strategies to combat gender oppression. There may be other times in which feminist analyses have been co-opted and here the challenge is to face what Fraser terms feminism's 'uncanny double', a version of its own claims which is used by or supports neoliberalism. This requires historicizing feminist analysis, taking account of the ways in which emancipatory claims may no longer be emancipatory in a new world order – something which Phipps achieves to a large extent in relation to the politics of the body. This could also include attending to different forms of feminism which may be less mainstream, but which provide examples and practices that counter neoliberalism or resist co-optation. Although Phipps nods to Third World and anti-capitalist feminist activism such as Venezuelan Chavismo, she focuses on the more dominant Western feminist trends – a politics of identity and recognition; valorization of the personal, experiential and liminal or counter-cultural evident in 'third wave' feminism; and radical feminism. This entails a loss for her argument. Potentially, it may require considering ways to re-territorialize feminist claims, pointing out – as Phipps does – that a critique of neoconservatism does not necessitate the promotion of neoliberal ideas about identity, choice and consumer agency. The point here is that these distinctions need to be untangled in taking up and extending Fraser's contentions.

In reading this book, I found myself feeling simultaneously trapped in a political dead end – given the ubiquitous resonances between feminism, neoliberalism and neoconservatism as Phipps so expertly illuminates – and, at the same time, thoroughly convinced by her argument and resultant call to 'reconnect the personal with the political, instead of positioning it as an end in itself' (p. 138). Given the depth and quality of analysis in *The Politics of the Body*, I can only hope that Phipps turns future attention towards what an anti-capitalist, feminist politics of the body might look like in order to develop ways forward in this 'challenging political context' (p. 137), a move which is desperately needed in the face of intensifying austerity (Brah et al., 2015).

## References

- Brah A, Szeman I and Gedalof I (2015) Feminism and the politics of austerity. *Feminist Review* (Special Issue) 109.  
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