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Book Review: *The Gender Order of Neoliberalism*¹

Reviewed by Jamin Andreas Hübner²

There is considerable scholarship on the subject of neoliberalism, but few scholars dig deep into its intersection with gender and gender roles in society. In their book, *The Gender Order of Neoliberalism*, Radhakrishnan and Solari speak from their own experiences and ask, “why…did women and men experiencing unfair conditions around mothering, work, and identity in places as different as India, Ukraine, and the United States accept and even embrace these conditions?” (p. 3). They argue that “an impoverished understanding of neoliberalism denies the constitutive character of gender and nation, making us ill equipped to organize transnationally to address the world’s most pressing problems” (p. 5).

The book’s introduction shows how global competition perverts women’s liberation by creating a “cover-story” about women’s “choices” and “entrepreneurship,” even as “motherhood and reproductive labor continue to be compulsory” (p. 6). Neoliberalism, in other words, creates its own gender hierarchies and values that continue to subjugate men and women as workers. Atypical relationships might be tolerated but not promoted, as the authors note:

Communal living, multiple partners, or shared parenting, all of which could be part of a non-heteronormative political economy, cannot thrive under neoliberalism. Women and men gender-nonconforming folks who refuse to perform free caring labor, like those who seek political power, can be targeted for misogynist attacks and experience physical harm. (p. 8)

The authors look at three main regions that underwent a neoliberal transformation: India, USSR/Russia, and the U.S. The neoliberal response to changing social conditions overlapped but maintained distinctions:

In the United States, the gains of the New Deal and its aftermath presented contradictory options to women in the labor market. Women were included during wartime and then pushed back into the home or less desirable occupations when the war was over. The imperial United States wished to represent its women as liberated by capitalist modernity but nonetheless devoted to their families. The Soviet Union wished to emancipate women from the drudgery of housework by compulsorily drawing them into paid labor, especially factory work. The state took on the responsibilities of childcare, healthcare, and education, and extended its reach into families to displace men as “little tsars” at the head of their families. In India, the new anti-colonial nationalist government wanted to show the world that India’s women, far from being oppressed by their culture, were modern, educated, and

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forward-looking. But in granting them equal civil rights, the new government strengthened patriarchal power within the family. (p. 13)

Neoliberalism’s concessions towards women’s liberation took the form of human capital: people are resources that will yield higher economic returns when taken care of. That is why people should be taken care of—not because they are people with rights or capable of suffering. Gender “empowerment” was fundamentally shaped in this framework, such that gendered workers are valued if they produce more. The neoliberal order at large encouraged countries to adopt the free market and participate globally “while at the same time preventing the world’s majority from thriving” (p. 16); global capitalism depends on a formal separation between classes (wealth owners/capitalists and workers/generators of wealth).

Chapters 2 and 3 (“Neoliberalism’s PreHistories” and “Investing in ‘Empowered’ Women”) also highlight how gendered order in neoliberalism emerges from interaction between competitive societies and models. This is most vividly seen in the Cold-War framework of the 1950s-80s. For example, equalization of the rights of men and women was well underway in Russia after 1918, along with generous maternity leave and benefits for families. Thus, U.S. President Nixon vetoed the 1972 childcare bill with similar benefits because it was seen as communist. The authors note that the discourse of capitalism mandates that “US women must care for their own children for free. This event has largely been erased from public memory, and support for state-subsidized childcare today has become a cause for politicians constructed as ‘far left’” (p. 29). US President Ronald Reagan went further in rolling back as many welfare programs as possible, to ensure that citizens had maximum “purchasing power” and protection to “consumer goods” (p. 29). Similarly, anti-LGBTQ+ efforts by the state (purges in employees, etc.) undermined the social order “because they did not contribute to the consumption patterns of nuclear families that were the basis for postwar American modernity” (p. 28). Many other countries and their gender expectations were also pulled into the two-empire conflict.

In chapter 4 (“Neoliberalism’s Gendered Architecture”), two major “structuring conditions” of neoliberalism can be identified. The first condition is that “While liberal states sought primarily to project their citizens…in the global neoliberal order, states protect elites and global capital so that they may move freely and profit while neglecting most individuals, thus leaving them constrained” (original emphasis, pp. 69-70). This is carried out through financial institutions and transnational corporations. All workers within this system are essentially exploited for shareholders. The authors add that:

In formerly colonized countries, women migrate to do low-wage, stereotypically feminine work, such as domestic work or factory work, reinforcing global labor hierarchies. Thus this first structuring condition of neoliberalism has turned poor and working-class women into a low-wage, permanently subordinate labor pool typed feminine, and thus disposable. (p. 71)

The second condition is “strengthened national borders are required to promote trade and competition while also regulating labor flows” (p. 71). Without border regulation, it is impossible to get a good deal from labor. Both of these conditions, furthermore, exist within the broader layout
of the world shaped by five-hundred years of European colonialism; colonialist countries (Britain, US, Germany, France) benefit the most from the entire economic system (p. 77). All countries are framed as “behind” or “ahead” such colonial/industrialized states.

For women, this has only resulted in additional labors: “neoliberal feminist ideology invites women around the world to combine their roles as mothers, entrepreneurs, and financial managers of the family to regulate their time, and plan for the future, and end global poverty in the process” (p. 75). It has also resulted in an economic transformation of femininity. In India, for example, entrance into the Miss World and Miss Universe beauty pageants were symbolic of a break with traditional femininity (based on the patriarchal notion that women should stay at home) and the entrance into a progressive view of femininity that fosters upward mobility for women (p. 91).

At the same time, as chapter 5 and 6 demonstrate, a new script was created for men: manly protectors, as embodied in Modi (India), Trump (US), and Putin (Russia). In India, for example, “virulently misogynistic, anti-Muslim media circulates widely to bolster an understanding of gender and nation that is exclusively Hindi and centers manly men” (p. 125). In a competitive economy, strength is key to winning. Biological determinism is also central, so that “homophobia is deployed in projects of oppositional modernity to promote ‘freedom’ from western hegemony, even while such projects aim to erase minority identities and denigrate ‘effeminate’ men” (p. 128). Similarly, “special vitriol is unleashed on women who refuse to provide domestic, reproductive, and emotional labor, thus rejecting their caregiving roles. Misogyny is a useful tool for dealing with the fallout of neoliberal policies that reduce or eliminate state-sponsored social services by pressuring women to pick up the slack” (p. 129). The conclusion of the book then takes stock of all the arguments made thus far and advocates a “multipolar future” and pushes readers away from the “ideology of [nationalist] exceptionalism” (p. 157).

*The Gender Order of Neoliberalism* is a brilliant book with many interesting, important, and original insights. It captures the hard truth about a “liberalized” economy when it comes to women workers in particular. They may have some degree of new freedoms, but nonetheless are subjugated in ever creative ways to benefit capital. Free market economies benefit more from patriarchy than gender equity and reinforce the coercive political apparatus necessary to keep it in place.

The authors argue that neoliberalism might be best thought of as originating more from simultaneous “east-west” networks than as a straight line out of western history. In the introduction, they even go as far as to say that “‘neo’-liberalism does not grow out of western liberalism but is also rooted in the histories of socialism and postcolonialism” (p. 18). This is insightful to a degree but is perhaps overstated; the role of neoclassicism and classical liberalism cannot be easily dismissed when discussing the origins of free market ideologies, which predate the 1960s-70s; Friedman and Hayek were instrumental in the formation of an official neoliberal ideology and its export into the policies of Britain and the US, and later Latin America and Russia. But it is true that neoliberalism is not a simple European diffusion (Blaut, 1993), and ideological origins are indeed, often decentralized. This kind of debate often centers on how hegemonic and influential the American empire really is throughout the 20th century, and I tend to see western imperialism as often understated. Moreover, I found the conclusion to the book particularly important in a world that has plenty of reasons to be cynical. The authors note that neoliberal feminism is successful because of its ability to inspire, motivate, and provide happiness in some
way or degree. They argue that “Feminist counter-movements for change that center justice must prioritize joy if they are to have any chance of success,” especially since there is a “joy deficit in sociology—the unwillingness to ask questions about joy or integrate joy into our discussions of social, economic, and political freedom” (p. 160).

In conclusion, *The Gender Order of Neoliberalism* is well written, thoroughly researched, and relevant to a variety of different fields and practices. Anyone interested in the intersection of gender with economics and social life will find it well worth the time.

**References**