

Editorial: Neoliberal Gender, Neoliberal Sex: Special Issue 5:1

Welcome to the latest special issue of *Assuming Gender*, an online academic journal dedicated to contemporary issues of gender and sexuality. In proposing the title 'Neoliberal Gender, Neoliberal Sex' for this sixth issue, it was precisely these contemporary issues of gender and sexuality that I wanted to address, for what speaks more of our current cultural and political moment than the figure of neoliberalism. As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have so ominously described in the title of their recently translated book, neoliberalism is now 'The New Way of the World'.¹ This proposition has been amply demonstrated in the UK's recent election. David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, was telling the voting public that a strong economy 'matters more than anything'.² In opposition, Ed Miliband, now ex-leader of the Labour Party, argued, 'It is only our plan that recognises that every person in every sector of the economy is a wealth creator.'³ On the economy at least, these two options do not appear very different from each other and, from the all-encompassing nature of these statements, it is clear that the economy and economic reasoning is the defining framework through which modern politics is conceptualised. This is the case not only in the UK but globally as neoliberal rationality has followed free markets and 'best' business practices world-wide. At times, these rationales have been enforced violently upon countries, exemplified most prominently in Chile at the beginning of the neoliberal revolution in 1973, and, since then, has followed the International Monetary Fund and

¹ Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society*, trans. by Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2013).

² 'Election 2015: David Cameron - no 'lack of drive' in Conservative campaign', 26 April 2015, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-32470837>>, [accessed 4 May 2015].

³ George Eaton, 'Miliband pitches to business with "a better" economic plan: Labour leader fights to claim the territory of growth from the Conservatives in speech at Jaguar Land Rover', *The New Statesman*, 15 February 2015, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/02/miliband-pitches-business-better-economic-plan>> [accessed 4 May 2015].

World Bank to most crisis-stricken economies around the world.⁴ In neoliberalism's heartland of the democratic West, however, the transformation to a whole generation's outlook and common sense has come more through what Wendy Brown describes as 'soft power'.⁵ By transforming how institutions govern individuals, and how individuals govern themselves, neoliberalism has seeped into the everyday understanding of self and other in today's society.

Critics, in trying to come to terms with this new normative structure, have figured neoliberalism less as an ideology than, following Michel Foucault, a form of political rationality. As Brown describes it, 'Political rationality is not an instrument of governmental practice, but rather the condition of possibility and legitimacy of its instruments, the field of normative reason from which governing is formed.'⁶ And for Dardot and Laval, 'neoliberalism, far from being an ideology or economic policy, is firstly and fundamentally a *rationality*, and as such tends to structure and organize not only the action of rulers, but also the conduct of the ruled.'⁷ What these authors highlight is that, rather than being merely a set of fiscal policies applied by an elite onto a passive public, this rationality acts as a 'regime of truth,' or as Foucault names it, veridiction.⁸ Such a regime is created when a discourse is turned into a site of truth and then subjected to the rules of verification by specialists able to determine truth from falsehood or error: it is an apparatus (*dispositif*) of knowledge/power. In neoliberalism the regime of truth is the economy and its specialist, the economist. As a consequence, whether the defining feature of this rationality is the

⁴ See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2007).

⁵ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁷ Dardot and Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 4.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*, ed. by Michel Senellart trans. by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 36.

application of competition to all forms of interaction or the transformation of each individual into a segment of human capital, or *homo oeconomicus*, in either case it normalises the idea that the individual is a rational, calculating, self-regulating, responsible and entrepreneurial and inculcates competitive individualism as the common-sense response to all events that affect us: to think 'correctly' one must think economically. Such a regime of truth, such a universal understanding of human motivation, has obvious consequences for the construction of gendered norms and practices.

Feminism has been variously embroiled in these transformations as some of the putative victories of the women's movement of the 1970s have been incorporated and normalised into current understandings of female agency. In Nancy Fraser's poignant and timely article in the *Guardian* at the end of 2013, 'How Feminism became Capitalism's Handmaiden – And How to Reclaim It', she outlines how some feminist discourses have contributed to legitimating neoliberalism, subverting the progressive aims of the movement and retooling them to fit a new normative market-led regime. She writes:

In a cruel twist of fate, I fear that the movement for women's liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society. That would explain how it came to pass that feminist ideas that once formed part of a radical worldview are increasingly expressed in individualist terms. Where feminists once criticised a society that promoted careerism, they now advise women to 'lean in'. A movement that once prioritised social solidarity now celebrates female

entrepreneurs. A perspective that once valorised 'care' and interdependence now encourages individual advancement and meritocracy.⁹

The promotion of individuality, 'leaning in', entrepreneurialism and meritocracy have all lead to a belief, for some, that feminism has succeeded and choice is the defining feature of contemporary society. As a consequence of such logic it can be posited that one chooses to be rich or poor, successful or unsuccessful, happy or unhappy and what gets in the way are personal problems or lack of motivation. Structural inequality is elided or considered to have been resolved by the 'impersonal' nature of the market. Feminism is, therefore, consigned to the dustbin of history as a phase that may have been necessary but has been resolved by the march of progress. Feminist academics such as Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, to name a few, have been quick to respond to the incorporation of feminism into such neoliberal discourses and have begun the process, continued in the articles presented here, of unpacking and critiquing these narratives that have come to dominate contemporary cultural production.

Drawing upon such feminist critique, the first three articles of this special issue all deal with this postfeminist landscape analysing the representation of women in three different national contexts: The United States, Britain and Ireland. **Laura E. Westengard**, in her article 'Vampire Fantasy: *Twilight's* Post-9/11 Neoqueer Vampires', addresses the *Twilight* phenomenon, drawing out connections between the US's post 9/11 political advancement of neoliberal and neoconservative values and the 'fantasy screen' of the

⁹ Nancy Fraser, 'How Feminism became Capitalism's Handmaiden – And How to Reclaim It', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal>>, [accessed 4 May 2015]. 'Leaning in' refers to Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of facebook's, bestselling self-help book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (WH Allen, 2013) where she suggests that women need to be more forceful and ambitious in the boardroom and 'lean in' rather than accept the status quo.

Cullens, the vampire 'family' that the saga is based upon. Westengard argues that, far from being a threat to normative sexuality, The *Twilight* vampires displace the traditional notions of the vampire by reconfiguring them as desirable bearers of vast wealth achieved, it appears, through a strict moral authoritarianism based upon physical abstinence (they are 'vegetarian' vampires and do not condone sex before marriage) but also overt displays of consumer power. This move, Westengard suggests, pacifies the experience of cultural trauma after 9/11 offering a 'proper' subject position for those considering a stance opposed the norms of neoliberal rationality. In **Sarah Hill's** contribution, 'The Ambitious Young Woman and the Contemporary British Sports Film', she explores how the figure of the ambitious young woman is mediated within the contemporary female-centred British sports film, *Chalet Girl*. Highlighting the relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism, Hill's analysis emphasises the importance of national context for the film and, in particular, the significance of the film's depictions of specifically British class hierarchies. However, she argues that while *Chalet Girl* emphasises class binaries, the film ultimately upholds the neoliberal myth that (class) barriers can be overcome through determination, hard work and the right choices. Similarly, **Margaret O'Neill's** article, 'You Still Can Have It All, But Just in Moderation: Neoliberal Gender and Post-Celtic Tiger 'Recession Lit'', argues that 'Chick Lit' of the post-Celtic Tiger recession is a central cultural site contributing to the logics of neoliberalism and the gendering of Irish national identity. The article explores three works from 2013, Cathy Kelly's *The Honey Queen*, Sheila O'Flanagan's *The Things We Never Say* and Cecelia Ahern's *How to Fall in Love*, arguing that they centralize individual adaptation in the boom to bust period. Their protagonists are resourceful women, who through their emotional strength and enterprising nature can still have it all, however, due

to these times of austerity, only in moderation. Each of these articles shows how cultural texts serve to naturalize the structural causes of inequality and intensify the rhetoric of neoliberal choice. They show the pressures placed upon ostensibly white, middle-class, heterosexual women to conform to a gruelling entrepreneurial norm as a way of organising desire and bodies within the strict boundaries of competitive individualism.

While the first three articles of the issue deal with the representation of women in cultural productions, in the final two essays **Oliver Stephanou** and **Baran Germen** both deal with queer negotiations of identity in neoliberal times. In 'Strange Intimacies' Stephanou shows how practices of barebacking can be aligned with certain contemporary demands for flexibility and adaptability through the barebacking community's valorisation of 'limitlessness' with regards to sexual practices and bodily capacities. By arguing for an approach to understanding such practices that avoids moral and pathological judgements, Stephanou develops an analysis of unsafe sex between men as an affective and political relation that could be described as a kinship system. The paper therefore negotiates the tension between a hegemonic view of neoliberal subject formation and practices that challenge or assimilate these dominant ideals into sexual conduct. He argues that unsafe sex is a form of negotiating and dwelling with precarity according to market-based models of risk management and distribution. Germen on the other hand uses Foucault's concept of heterotopia to question the assimilation of LGBT identities into the development programs of modern states with a particular focus on Turkey and the protests that grew up around the redevelopment of Gezi Park in 2013. While the LGBT community found recognition in the politics of Turkey unknown before the protests and the park has been revamped into a stylish public space, Germen suggests that what has been lost with the park's

redevelopment is a site where identities were not fixed and were, instead, open to negotiation: essentially a heterotopia. He goes on to develop this understanding through an analysis of Ferzan Özpetek's *Steam* in order to think through the critique that queer heterotopias may embody. He argues that the film constructs the site of hamam as a queer heterotopia that spatially breaks the teleological logic of modernity, housing modes of being, relationalities, and socialities inassimilable into an identitarian sexual liberalism. The analyses of Gezi Park and *Steam* reveal both the precariousness and potency of queer heterotopias in the age of neoliberal modernity and the gay citizen. Both articles, consequently, raise important questions about identity formation in negotiation with and against the contemporary dominance of neoliberal rationalities.

To round off the special issue we have two book reviews that continue to assess the critical response to neoliberalism's effects upon our understanding of gender. **Caleb Sivyer** takes a closer look at Beatrix Campbell's *End of Equality* (London: Seagull Books, 2013) finding it a valuable addition to the feminist literature on neoliberalism as it debunks the notion that sexual inequality will be inevitably eroded by the balancing effect of free-market forces and individual empowerment. **Jennifer Dawn Whitney** reviews Alison Phipps' recent book, *Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), finding it both a thorough and exciting analysis of how neoliberal and neoconservative norms are played out through female bodies.

Each of these contributions shows the critical power and scope of using the theoretical concept of neoliberalism as a term to think through the complexity of the contemporary moment. Gender and sexuality, in these articles, is shown to be deeply enmeshed in how power is played out and naturalised on and through bodies and their

attendant desires through forms of cultural representation. It is also notable by its absence and impossibility what is not able to be represented in neoliberal times, and which is most sensitively commented upon, I think, through Gergen's use of Foucault's notion of heterotopia. This notion holds out the promise of a collectivity outside of individualist, entrepreneurial logic of neoliberal rationality. It is my hope that such interventions that are gathered here in this special issue of *Assuming Gender* will lead to a greater understanding of what is demanded by neoliberalism, what is made impossible through the domination of such a political rationality and, in setting out this terrain, to begin to inspire ways to break with this market logic.

Tom Harman

Guest Editor