

Review: Beatrix Campbell, *End of Equality: The Only Way Is Women's Liberation* (London: Seagull Books, 2013)

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In recent years, at least since the financial crisis of 2008, it has become acceptable to talk, once again, about capitalism, and to use words like class and crisis. A new scepticism towards capitalism and its promises of emancipation and empowerment has arisen in the face of widening inequality and the soaring wealth of the super-rich. Occupy Wall Street encouraged us to think of society as split between the 1% and the 99% and a slew of books and documentaries started to question the logic and efficacy of the free market. Hence, neoliberal capitalism and its policies of free trade, globalisation and austerity began to be put under scrutiny for a wide and bitter audience. Within these debates, one issue that has arisen is that of sexual and gender equality. Whilst advocates of capitalist liberal democracy often paint an optimistic picture of the future in which sexual inequality will be inevitably eroded by the balancing effect of the free market and individual empowerment, this view has recently come under fire from feminists and other activists who point to the stagnation or in some cases reversal of this supposedly inevitable path to equality.

Beatrix Campbell's short manifesto, *End of Equality: The Only Way Is Women's Liberation*, is just such an attack and a particularly withering one at that. Campbell is no stranger to the topic of sexual inequality, publishing numerous essays and books on topics such as inequality, poverty and political conflict.¹ *End of Equality* is a slim volume at 92 pages (though with almost half as many pages of footnotes) but constitutes a dense and blistering critique of neoliberal orthodoxy. Campbell wastes no time: by the fourth page she charges neoliberalism with having strengthened patriarchal structures of inequality and creating a climate that is hostile to feminism. What she calls 'capitalism's second coming' has given a new articulation to male supremacy and created a new sexual

¹ See for example her 1984 work *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the 80s* (London: Virago, 1984).

settlement: 'neopatriarchal neoliberalism'.² Whilst Campbell argues in a couple of places throughout her manifesto that resistance has not died, her account and the overall tone of her writing is bleak. Indeed, the manifesto opens with the lines 'Women's liberation is dead. Long live women's liberation' (p. 1). And whilst Campbell ends her book by calling for feminists to write new revolutionary manifestos, this call to arms is somewhat muted by characterising contemporary women's liberation in terms such as 'do-able' and 'reasonable' (p. 92). Added to this is the repeated use of the word 'impunity' throughout: Campbell shows how an alarmingly high number of cases of institutional sexism are frequently met with judicial impunity. The repeated appearance of this word thus forms a negative refrain throughout the book, suggesting that the project to end sexual equality is almost impossible.

Campbell justifies her narrow focus on gender on the grounds that it is 'omni-relevant', 'decisive in organizing social difference and in conditioning the exercise of power' (p. 4). Gendered violence and inequality are thus an inherent part of the wider failings of neoliberal capitalism and makes stark those failings. For example, the idea that twenty-first century capitalism constitutes a logic of liberation, where choice and competition are said to ensure a more equal and healthy society is belied by the fact that the pay gap between men and women has either stagnated or in some cases widened. Massive amounts of unpaid work, usually carried out by women, is not audited by global fiscal policies and is often made worse by global financial policies according to Campbell. Added to this is the threat of violence under neoliberalism in the precarious spaces in which ordinary people live and work, such as slums and war zones.³ In all of these aspects, gender violence is ever-present: from the rape and abuse of women in zones of conflict to the hazardous working environments that make women easy targets of sexual predators and gangs.

² Beatrix Campbell, *End of Equality* (London: Seagull Books, 2013), p. 4. All further references will appear in the body of the text in parentheses.

³ See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006); Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Doreen Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

Campbell's manifesto takes in a plethora of examples of inequality from across the globe today, within areas such as labour, childcare, war and consumerism. She begins with money, and gives particular attention to the bonus, 'the banking industry's most conspicuous signifier' (p. 8). On her account, bonuses are not wages, but 'bribes that pose as rewards', the purpose of which is 'to broadcast hierarchies and the *necessity* of inequality, and to disguise the collaborative context of work' (pp. 8-9). The latter idea is brought vividly to life as Campbell lists some of the usually invisible work that supports the banking sector, such as the preparation of food or the cleaning of toilets. Even before the financial crisis of 2008, women had been 'trying to expose the bonus as a vector of excess, secrecy and sexism' (p. 9). The rise of the bonus can be seen by comparing the relationship between salaries and bonuses between the 1990s and today: whilst executive directors earned twice their basic salary through bonuses, in 2013 they were earning four times the amount. Added to this is the fact that the 'bonus gender gap among managers is a spectacular 80 per cent'. One of the biggest problems with this structural inequality is that it goes unnoticed and is thus immune from scrutiny – as 'companies do not bother to collect [these] statistics' (p. 11).

Campbell does offer examples of successful lawsuits where women were able to bring unequal pay issues to the justice system and win their cases. However, many of these cases have not led to real change at the level of national policy and business practices, and in some cases the women did not receive their full compensation. Equal-pay cases in Birmingham, for example, cost the council millions of pounds which it could not afford to pay, and which the government refused to help with despite agreeing to bail out the banks in 2008 – in these times of austerity, sexual equality becomes another causality of neoliberal ideology. Most interestingly, Campbell reveals that the Equal Pay Act of 1970 originated from the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. Out of the latter, a young Belgian human rights lawyer, Eliane Vogel-Polsky, 'excavated the equality protocols' and invoked them '*for women*' (pp. 16-17). Interviewed by Campbell, Vogel-Polsky makes the striking claim that the original equal pay protocols were far from any kind of feminist idea but in fact were based on an old patriarchal model. Campbell quotes her as saying that "'Men believed that if employers were

obliged to pay women the same as men, of course, they would take the men” (pp. 16-17). Vogel-Polsky thus took up this protocol and put it in the service of women’s equal pay. However, whilst the European Court of Justice vindicated her by ruling that this article should apply to all states and agreements, the experience of women since this ruling has shown that institutional sexism is still very much alive in the workplace. Vogel-Polsky’s pessimistic explanation is that “The equal pay law was programmed to be *not* achieved” (p. 17). Policies and protocols are clearly not enough to guarantee equality.

From this account of the difficulties of achieving equal pay, even when the law is supposedly on the side of equality, Campbell looks at a number of examples from around the world. She begins by looking at the gap between paid and unpaid labour, noting also that men still do less domestic work than women. Added to this is the recent British austerity budget of 2010, which, according to Campbell, ‘allocated 72 per cent of the financial burden to women and 28 per cent to men’ (p. 27). Once again, Campbell finds that this massive redistribution of wealth away from women and children is ‘rewarded by impunity’ as budgets are sacrosanct and not easily open to legal challenge (pp. 28-29). Likewise, Campbell finds massive problems elsewhere in the world. The supposed success stories of newly capitalist Asian countries like China and South Korea were supposed to usher in a new era of profitability and a higher standard of living for all through technological innovation and global trade. But, as Campbell argues, the evidence of a wide gap between men and women’s pay ‘belies the faith that somehow industrial innovation spontaneously yields socio-sexual emancipation’ (p. 30). Instead, workers throughout the world are now plunged into a state of precariousness, the new state of labour which ‘transfers risk and resources away from the company to the worker’ and in particular the female worker (p. 31). Precariousness relates not only to pay but also to living and working conditions. In Mexico’s Ciudad Juárez, ‘a boomtown’ and ‘triumph of free trade’, sexism and violence are rife (p. 35). Whilst the factories there generate profit by utilising the combination of tax free importing and tariff-free exporting, the trade routes of goods are shared with drugs and the city has become synonymous with ‘femicide’ (p. 37). Large numbers of women

are murdered and/or disappear. This example of a neoliberal city reveals the dark underside to financial success.

From a consideration of the spaces of inequality, Campbell then moves to an examination of how sexual inequality makes its marks on the body. In one section, she argues that various forms of conflict and violence construct 'violent masculinities' by emphasising the 'priority for militarism' (p. 58). She charges neoliberalism with having created '[g]eographies of violence' in which male bodies have been turned into weapons whilst female bodies are subjected to rape, exploitation and death (p. 57). But Campbell also turns her attention to neoliberalism's effects on the construction of bodies in non-conflict spaces, noting the rise of beauty and health industries which sculpt and discipline the body. Here, 'empowerment is invested in the body and in men: fortunes are made from enhancing or shrinking bosoms, lips, skin' (pp. 61-62). Neoliberalism's increased emphasis upon individual choice and the commodification of everyday life leads to the view that the individual body is not a relation but a resource, something to be enhanced and managed, and which is styled to arouse and provoke attention from the gaze of others. The cynical instrumentalism of this view of the body is captured in the depressing phrase 'erotic capital' (p. 66). Campbell sees this as based in 'a pessimistic engagement with masculinity. It is represented as a force to be aroused and managed, or feared and managed – but not changed' (p. 62). Campbell is at her most intransigent and black and white on this issue: 'Being seen has never given women social power' (p. 67). But the appeal of this conception of the body is strong and arises from the success of neoliberal ideology, in which the free market 'prevails as a metaphor for life' (p. 78).

Amidst all this bleakness, there are examples of resistance to the neoliberal model of sex and gender. On the one hand, Campbell gives examples of protest such as that of South Korea's first female shipyard welder, Kim Jin-suk, who staged a protest by occupying a crane for almost an entire year and which resulted in the company agreeing to reinstate formerly sacked workers. Similar examples of labour protest are given from other countries, such as a group of nursery nurses and

teaching assistants in Scotland who won their case at the Supreme Court in 2013. On the other hand, Campbell locates resistance in spheres such as the art world. She gives as an example the work of Tracy Emin, whose self-portraits function as acts of bearing-witness which invite sympathy, in contrast to *The Sun's* Page 3 which 'organised the male gaze' and created 'a manly, misanthropic and patriotic public' (p. 64). These examples of resistance then build up to Campbell's conclusion, in which she calls for a project of bearing witness to the 'landscapes drenched by "social suffering"', and the '[v]alidation and vindication' of victims of sexism (p. 90). Whilst neopatriarchal neoliberalism constitutes a new sexual settlement, it is ultimately 'unsustainable', 'shaky and contested' (pp. 91-92). In contrast with today's society, *End of Equality* proposes a utopian picture where 'men stop stealing [women's] stuff - our time, our money and our bodies'; where the costs of childcare are shared; and where the focus of society is on renewal instead of reckless growth and waste (p. 92).⁴ Campbell ends by adapting Marx and Engels, arguing that feminism must meet the 'Spectre of Feminism' with 'its own new manifestos' (p. 92).

End of Equality undoubtedly displays a negative picture of the contemporary world, concentrating most of its attention on how neoliberalism has undermined sexual equality and offered empty promises of female empowerment. However, whilst one might wish for more positive examples of feminist activism and a more affirmative tone, it is certainly pleasing to see a lack of the triumphalist rhetoric of some contemporary feminist writing (for example Alison Wolf's 2013 *The XX Factor*). Furthermore, given its manifesto form, it may be uncongenial to criticise the book for a lack of theoretical rigour with respect to its account of neoliberalism and the latter's shaping of sexual and gender identity, but such an approach is surely needed to give a fuller account of neoliberalism's production of sex and gender today. For now, Campbell's punchy and pessimistic manifesto provides a provocative account of neoliberal inequality and calls for a reorganised and rejuvenated feminist movement to put pressure on neoliberal hegemony.

⁴ Today's unregulated economies are nicely captured by the phrase 'après moi, le déluge' as David Harvey (among others) has argued. See Harvey, 'The Future of the Commons', *Radical History Review*, 109 (2011), 101-07 (p. 107).