

**Review: Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014)**

Jennifer Dawn Whitney (Cardiff University, UK)

On the same day that I began to write this review I received a message in my inbox from a popular feminist website. The subject line read: ‘we’re always in the market for some female empowerment’. Scrolling through the message led me to links boasting the finest in ‘female empowerment’ paraphernalia: t-shirts, tote bags, jewellery, and journals.

Embellished with brazen feminist slogans and logos, these products seemed to dare consumers to be their best feminist selves.

We appear to be up for the challenge. Triumphantly donning t-shirts with the phrase ‘this is what a feminist looks like’ scrawled across the front, we are proud to proclaim—by way of our wallets—that, indeed, we are of the feminist persuasion. This notion that female empowerment can be bought and sold percolates through contemporary Western feminism. Nevertheless, it is a relatively new idea. It is only since the late-twentieth century that we, in the capitalist West, have come to see our choices in the marketplace as self-defining and self-actualizing. This ‘explosion of market-based choices’ that has ‘come to inform the social construction of identities’ (p. 9) is what Alison Phipps addresses in her compelling and very readable book, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

Phipps begins by establishing the definitions and parameters of her project. She makes plain from the start that feminism-cum-consumerism is part and parcel of a larger neoliberal approach to politics and society. Neoliberalism, she explains, privileges (consumer) choice as a discursive ideal: it is an expression of choice that makes us feel empowered. However, as Phipps elucidates with nuance and precision, this concept of choice also is inseparable from a 'rhetoric of personal responsibility' (p. 11). It is this rhetoric that defines the 'ideal neoliberal subject' as 'one who faces adversity and makes the best of all situations' (p. 34). While the system of neoliberalism suggests individual affirmation, it is insidious in its effects. By placing sole responsibility onto the individual, neoliberalism, Phipps contends, effaces any political analysis of structural issues and inequalities.

'Through channels such as government policy, advertising and popular culture', Phipps goes on to illustrate how 'neoliberalism has become a normative framework' (p. 11). Within this hegemonic structure, not only is political analysis challenging in practice, but, as she clarifies, political and social issues also get 'converted into market terms' that have 'consumption-based solutions' (p. 11). By turning such problems over to the free market, we can see how neoliberalism, as Phipps asserts, is in a 'contemporary alliance' (p. 19) with neoconservatism. Dangerous in its manifestations, this alliance then functions to police social groups who are unable, or refuse, to make 'the best of' the market in order to solve

their (complex and structurally-based) problems. It is this alliance that Phipps takes to task throughout the entirety of her book.

As the title makes clear, Phipps is taking issue with a neoliberal/neoconservative value system by way of the body. Crucially, and I think rightly, Phipps identifies the feminine-gendered body as a key site upon which neoliberal and neoconservative policies and practices are enacted. If identity is informed by and through the body—which is ‘shaped to a great extent by consumer culture’ (p. 9)—then it is no surprise that what are known as ‘body projects’ have become more and more prominent in the West. For example, Phipps explains that, ‘among the privileged’ there is ‘a dramatic growth in spending on beauty, fitness and fashion,’ and ‘a rise in alternative health practices’, as well as an increase in ‘cosmetic surgeries’ (p. 10). Defined as an exercise in choice, these consumer practices not only attempt to write gendered identity onto the body, but also map out ways in which choice is used to define and prohibit certain practices upon non-Western bodies as well.

Taking a Foucauldian genealogical approach, Phipps explores the troubling relationship described above through four specific issues. Respectively, chapters two through five engage with sexual violence, gender and Islam, sex work, and childbirth and breastfeeding. Calling attention to the discourse of personal choice around these issues, each chapter interrogates specific cultural moments where neoliberal and neoconservative politics work hand-in-hand to regulate and police women’s bodies. Despite the idiosyncratic

methodology, *The Politics of the Body* demonstrates the ubiquity of a neoliberal/neoconservative value system, and its effects upon the feminine-gendered body.

Much like this review, Phipps begins her book with a brief story. She writes of how she and her partner attended a barbecue with friends and neighbours. She was pregnant at the time, and inevitably received unsolicited advice on how to give birth in the most empowered way possible. She explains that 'this book is not a personal one, but has been inspired by experiences such as this' (p. 1). While not a personal project, *The Politics of the Body* is still a relatable one, which never loses its incisiveness. What I appreciate most is Phipps's skill in breaking down the binaries intrinsic to much of feminist politics and activism. She has the ability to deconstruct oppositional thinking around some very charged topics, and redirect her readers back to what is most important: structural analysis. In dealing with the contemporary state of feminism and how it has been influenced and co-opted by neoliberal and neo-conservative agendas, Phipps's adept criticisms are welcomed and needed. Her work is thorough—*and exciting*. This book would be suitable reading for researchers in Cultural Studies, Feminist Theory, Politics, and Sociology, and it is accessible enough for those exploring issues of everyday sexism as well.