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## **The Happy Marriage of Capitalism and Feminism**

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 The Happy Marriage of Capitalism and Feminism
 

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Sheryl Sandberg was not a feminist when she was attending college in the 1980s. She and her friends thought that feminists were angry, man-hating, humorless, and irrelevant. She has since come to the realization that men run the world, and she has launched a new feminist movement called "Lean In" to change that. Women lead only 17 of the 195 independent countries and 21 of the Fortune 500 companies; getting more women into these top offices is her goal. From her current position as COO of Facebook, Sandberg is urging women to work hard, dream big, and "break things."

Lean In is a multi-media phenomenon. The book *Lean In*, which has spent months on *The New York Times* best seller list, is an elaboration of her now famous TED Talk (with nearly 2.5 million views). Proceeds from the book support a nonprofit organization called Lean In Foundation. Lean In websites encourage readers to form informal discussion groups called Lean In Circles, and post their testimonials on the Lean In blog. Corporate sponsors are implementing Lean In seminars as part of their diversity training programs. So far, 61 Fortune 500 companies have partnered with the Lean In movement, including Chevron, Coca-Cola, DuPont, and Wal-Mart.

The basic message of *Lean In* is that women are disadvantaged in career development due to internalized sexism. Our culture teaches us that women are less aggressive, less ambitious, and less deserving than men. Consequently, women hold themselves back, expressing reluctance to seize opportunities and volunteer for risky stretch assignments. Overwhelmed by the desire to be popular, women give up competing for success and settle for stable jobs. Motherhood also stymies career development. According to Sandberg, women start pulling back on their career ambitions before they have children—even before they find a mate—in anticipation of the demands

*Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, by **Sheryl Sandberg** with **Nell Scovell**. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. 228pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780385349949.

that motherhood will place on them. A large percentage of highly educated professional women "opt out" of the workforce to care for their children, with disastrous long-term economic consequences. The only way to counter this impulse and break the glass ceiling is to stay determinedly focused at work, and, well, lean in.

Sandberg does not deny that workplaces and political organizations are sexist. She writes that barriers to women in power are both institutional and internal, but her focus is on changing internal barriers because they are more malleable than external ones ("We can dismantle the hurdles in ourselves today" [p. 9]). Her advice to women boils down to three points: she encourages women to seek out and pursue all opportunities for career development ("sit at the table"), to demand that their husbands take equal responsibility for housework and childcare ("make your partner a real partner"), and to minimize any disruption of their careers posed by maternity and motherhood ("don't leave before you leave").

*Lean In* easily could be dismissed as the latest twist on the classic American genre of upbeat self-improvement manuals. Indeed, after examining the book, the editor of *Contemporary Sociology* was unsure that it merited any serious attention. Certainly the book is hopelessly class-biased; Sandberg is talking to the one percent (a point she readily concedes). The book is filled with cloying gratitude toward the men (husbands, mentors, bosses) who facilitated her career, and self-deprecating personal anecdotes that often directly contradict the advice she gives

her readers. Weirdly, she repeatedly lauds stay-at-home mothers for doing this “important and demanding and joyful work” (p. 95) that is “at least as stressful and demanding as a paying job” (p. 118), thus undermining her central message. The point, I suppose, is to stave off another round of the mommy wars by making the book appear more family friendly than it actually is. But in my opinion, it is not so much the specious arguments, but the book’s implications for feminism and feminist scholarship that warrants a review.

*Lean In* represents a disturbing trend toward “neoliberal feminism” (Eisenstein 2010, Fraser 2009). Unlike liberal feminism, which relies on the state to rectify problems of women’s unequal opportunities and underrepresentation, neoliberal feminism promotes individual responsibility, limited government, market-driven solutions to social problems, and what Arlie Hochschild (2003) has called the commercialization of intimate life. Most concerning of all, Sandberg draws on decades of sociological scholarship on gender and work to ground her argument.

Which brings me to the title of this review. In 1979, Heidi Hartmann published a classic article entitled “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism.” The article describes the historical and political tensions between activists in the New Left, who privileged class analysis in their critique of society, and feminists who focused attention on social injustices tied to gender inequality. Hartmann made the case that capitalism is based on class and gender oppression, as well as racism. From Hartmann’s perspective and that of other socialist feminists of her generation, the fight for gender justice must be integrated with a fight against capitalism.

Neoliberal feminism, in stark contrast, absolves capitalism of playing any role in the oppression of women. In fact, according to Sandberg, the capitalist free market is the *solution* to gender inequality. Her “feminist manifesto” (p. 9) was made possible by her boss Mark Zuckerberg, who gave her the time to write it and to promote it (for an insider account, see Losse 2013). She is convinced that companies are eager to exploit female talent because diversity is good for business. Not altruism but the bottom line is their motivation. She approvingly cites

Kunal Modi, a student at the Harvard Kennedy School, who wrote: “For the sake of American corporate performance and shareholder returns, men must play an *active* role in ensuring that the most talented young workers (often women . . .) are being encouraged to advocate for their career advancement. . . . So men, let’s get involved now—and not in a patronizing manner that marginalizes this as some altruistic act on behalf of our mothers, wives, and daughters—but on behalf of ourselves, our companies, and the future of our country” (p. 165). Neoliberal feminism and corporate capitalism: a marriage made in heaven.

Sandberg implies that corporations would hire and promote even more women if it were not for government interference. Regulations prevent corporations from retaining female talent, such as in the case when managers do not ask about women’s future family plans for fear of running afoul of labor laws. If managers were allowed to inquire about personal family matters, she thinks that they would be better able to deal with the anxieties that cause many women to scale back and to opt out. Sandberg says she regularly asks women when they are planning to have children (although she gives them the option not to answer, perhaps to reassure the HR department at Facebook). Anti-discrimination law can also stand in the way of successful salary negotiations, as when women demand the right to equal compensation. “Mentioning gender in work situations often makes people visibly uncomfortable,” Sandberg writes, so it is sometimes best that women steer clear of the topic in order to keep negotiations on a “friendly”—as opposed to a legal—basis (p. 150). Women may need the protections of sexual harassment law, but they certainly do not need Affirmative Action. She expresses horror at the suggestion that her own career was helped along by such a program (p. 144). In keeping with neoliberalism, her book promotes the free market—and not government policy—as the best route for getting women into positions of power.

Sandberg is proud of the many male corporate executives who have embraced her feminist message. In one telling passage, she refers to the support she received from the CEO of Vodafone: “[He] shares my belief

that women sometimes hold themselves back. He also believed this message was easier to hear from a woman than a man. His point is valid. If a man had delivered the same message or even gently pointed out that women might be taking actions that limited their options, he would have been pilloried" (p. 149). In other words, a man who urges women to lean in would be considered a sexist, but when Sandberg articulates the same message, she is a feminist. How is this possible? Presumably, a man would be accused of blaming the victim if he told women that they are excluded from top jobs not because of discrimination, but because they don't work hard enough. But Sandberg is nobody's victim. She has figured out how to reach the top and she is passing on the secret to other women. Voila! Sexism miraculously transforms into feminism.

Sandberg knows the secret of executive men's success because she shares their lifestyle. She has completely assimilated the "ideal worker norm" (Acker 1990; Williams 2001). A central pillar of gendered organizations, this norm expects and rewards slavish devotion to work. Those who have responsibilities outside of the workplace—or even a life outside of the workplace—have a hard time conforming to this ideal (to put it mildly). A female Horatio Alger, Sandberg proves that a woman can make it to the top by working as vigorously and as ceaselessly as a man—all the while raising two children.

Sandberg is able to pull this off because she is wealthy, or "fortunate" as she prefers. She can outsource childrearing to a nanny and, for the occasional child care emergency, she can rely on her sister who lives close by (and who just happens to be a pediatrician). She admits that she is not a supermom, but she does insist on being home for dinner every day. Because she is powerful at work, she can make this happen, but even when she is at home she is working. Sandberg describes squeezing her family life into her 24/7 work schedule, sending emails after dinner, during her kids' soccer games, and even from her maternity bed at the hospital. She writes, "The days when I even think of unplugging for a weekend or vacation are long gone" (p. 133).

I do not doubt that this is the lifestyle that is required for entry into the C-suite, but I do

have doubts that it can enhance the lives of many women. Certainly, Sandberg and those at her level are handsomely rewarded for their hard work, but how do other women benefit? Sandberg believes that the very presence of women in positions of power dispels sexist stereotypes, thus smoothing the path to even more women in power and promoting greater gender equality in society overall. Sandberg's feminism does not include much in the way of substantive goals, but she nevertheless believes that "conditions for all women will improve when there are more women in leadership roles giving strong and powerful voice to their needs and concerns" (p. 7).

The problem, of course, is that neither Sandberg nor the corporate world she represents can give voice to women's needs and concerns. She answers to corporate boards, not to a feminist movement. Like Flannery O'Connor's fictional Church of Christ without Christ, hers is a feminism without feminists, designed to appeal to elites regardless of political affiliation (she actually calls herself a "pom pom girl for feminism" [p. 158]). Although the book quotes from Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, and Alice Walker, it also has plenty of laudatory things to say about Meg Whitman, Marissa Mayer, and Larry Summers. It is so studiously bipartisan that both Condoleezza Rice and Chelsea Clinton can endorse this book (each of whom provided blurbs).

As a top-down corporate attempt to fashion and control the feminist message, *Lean In* is nothing new. Capitalism's ability to appropriate and commodify discontent is a key to its longevity. But Sandberg's book is unique because it relies on feminist scholarship to make its argument. The works of many distinguished sociologists are cited in the book's extensive footnotes, lending the project a great deal of legitimacy. Granted, none of us are capable of determining how our research is used. But we abet this corporate appropriation when, instead of critiquing capitalist enterprises, we seek funding and "buy in" from them. This is the unfortunate trend now encouraged by our increasingly neoliberal universities, as they urge scholars to pursue "public-private partnerships" to replace dwindling state funding for research. *Lean In* is a wake-up call to

feminists and feminist scholars to resist this corporate involvement and to offer alternative visions of social and economic justice for women.

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