Feminism, the Family and the New ‘Mediated’ Maternalism
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Introduction: The New Maternal-Feminine.

In this article I trace a line of development from liberal to neo-liberal feminism which is, I claim, being at least partly realised and embodied through the ubiquitous figure of the middle-class, professional, wife and mother. Following on from a comment by Stuart Hall on the centrality of the ‘middle class’ to the neoliberal project, I overlay this with the additional categories of gender and maternity.¹ This image of motherhood not only displaces but also begins to dismantle a longstanding political relationship which has linked post-war social democracy with maternity, while simultaneously providing the political right with a new, more contemporary script which allows it to take the lead in current debate on family life. My tone is somewhat tentative for the reason that what I am referring to seems, at present, more like a strong undercurrent than a fully fledged sociological phenomenon. The analysis I offer is also restricted, more or less, to contemporary Britain, with several references to US popular culture and to US liberal feminism for the reason that these have provided so much of a steer for the way in which the neoliberal agenda in the UK has addressed motherhood and domestic life. This agenda is quite different from the now out-of-date conservative mantra of ‘family values’. The right-wing newspaper The Daily Mail in its Femail Section has been particularly forceful in its championing of a style of affluent, feminine maternity. This idea of active, (ie en route to the gym) sexually confident motherhood marks an extension of its pre-maternal equivalent, the ambitious and aspirational young working woman. It is also consistently pitched against an image of the abject, slovenly and benefit-dependent ‘underclass’ single mother, the UK equivalent of the US ‘welfare queen’. Only in academic feminism do we find a more

¹ Stuart Hall ‘New Labour’s Double Shuffle’ 2003, this importance of the middle class echoes Foucault’s (2006) account of the German Ordoliberal thinker, a man called Roepke who likewise saw the importance of de-proletarianisation of society as a means of vanquishing the spectre of working class struggle.
critical and empathetic response to the difficulties faced by out-of-work single mothers.²

While feminism has for many decades been a political formation with historic connections closer to the left than the right, this alignment is now undergoing change, with substantial gains for the right should it manage to develop further what is at the moment merely a kind of feminist flourish. Within and alongside the UK Coalition government we can see a fledgling feminist strand led mostly by an urban, upper middle class, cosmopolitan elite including former Cabinet Minister Louise Mensch, Home Secretary Theresa May, Lib Dem MP Jo Stimson as well as a number of influential young spokeswomen from right-wing think tanks such as Policy Reform³. This endorsement is informed by 1970s US liberal feminism, with an emphasis on equal rights, condemnation of domestic and sexual violence, and action against genital mutilation. It is drawn into the field of popular neoliberal hegemony which the Tory Party is intent on building particularly through the idea of ‘welfare reform’ and in this realm it takes the form of an unapologetically middle class feminism, shorn of all obligations to less privileged women or to those who are not ‘strivers’ (a favoured term within welfare reform discourse). The task I undertake here is to somehow clear the pathway so that a fuller understanding of these quite complex processes can be arrived at. In what is I hope a continuation of feminist discussions on the rise of neoliberalism led by Wendy Brown on the ‘end of liberal democracy, (2005), and followed through by my own recent writing on young women as subjects of the new meritocracy under New Labour (2008), and by Nancy Fraser in her provocative argument that there has been ‘feminist complicity’ (2009), I aim to show how a new momentum for the political right comprises a careful claiming of progressive heterosexual maternal womanhood. What has emerged recently is a perhaps unexpected rehabilitation of feminism as a broad constellation of progressive socio-political interests converging around the category of woman, which can be usefully deployed by those modernising forces of the right, centre and also centre left, where previously such an association would be shunned. The very words ‘conservative feminism’ are now common-place, part of the everyday vocabulary of Louise Mensch

³ eg Policy Exchange think tank, including Charlotte McLeod
in her newspaper articles, blogs and TV appearances⁴ and a lively ‘talking point’ across contemporary political culture in the UK. Feminism is no longer despised but given some new life through an articulation with a specific range of values pertaining to the project of contemporary neoliberalism. This connection is confirmed towards the end of the best-selling book titled _Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead_ by the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg where she unashamedly declares herself a feminist. I will return to Sandberg’s book and its significance in the final section of this paper, but for the moment I want to highlight this take-up of feminism as an aspect of the ambitious reach of neoliberalism such that its principles have become not just a new kind of common-sense, but also an active force-field of political values, at a time when the political left has been crushed or at least subdued. Others would remark that parties of both the left and (centre) left have in any case already conceded to these same goals, such that there is not a great deal of difference in the UK between the modernising agenda of New Labour and the austerity-driven policies of the Coalition government. In each case there has been a commitment to privatisation of the public sector, the denigration of welfare regimes as producing unaffordable dependencies, the emphasis on self-responsibility, entrepreneurialism and constant advocacy of stable (if also now flexible and gay) forms of family life.

As a starting point then I would say that there is something of a feminist endorsement detectable in the political air. The animosity and repudiation which was a feature of the Blair government and the popular culture and media of the time, has receded. Support for ‘hard working families’ a phrase first coined by Gordon Brown during his time as Chancellor of the Exchequer is retained by both leaders of the Tory Party and the Liberal Democrats but this now incorporates a more engaged and sympathetic dialogue with mothers (stay at home and working) with some indication that this is a ‘feminist issue’ for today⁵. This promulgating of women seems like more than just a pragmatic move to secure the female vote, and more than a knee-jerk response to the vocal presence of online campaigners and new female constituencies⁶. Instead it is arguably part of a process of inventing a repertoire of woman-centred positions which

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⁴See unfashionista.com/2013/05/29/reality-based-feminism/
⁵David Cameron on BBC Radio 4 Women’s Hour 27th July 2013 see www.BBC/Radio 4/Women’s Hour/Episode Guide/July 27 2013
⁶See for example www.thefword.org.uk/
will confirm and enhance the core values of the neoliberal project. So much of this ideological work takes place outside, but in close proximity to, the field of formal politics, in culture and in particular within the various forms of feminine mass media including BBC Radio 4 Women’s Hour, the Femail Section of the Daily Mail mentioned above, the Women’s Pages (or Lifestyle sections) of all the national quality daily newspapers such as The Guardian, The Independent, the Times and the Daily Telegraph, some key daytime TV programmes such as Loose Women, and of course the range of women’s magazines from the fashion-oriented Grazia to Red, a monthly publication, for one generation older than Elle and therefore targeting middle-class mothers (stay-at-home and in employment), to the traditional Women’s Own. Where in the early 2000s an invitation to female empowerment seemed to require a ritualistic denunciation of feminism as old-fashioned and no longer needed, (with the exception of the left-leaning Guardian newspaper and BBC Radio 4s Womens Hour), the current repertoire now feels able to make a claim, of sorts, to a feminism, of sorts. The observations I offer in the pages that follow suggest the value of a feminism (with roots in the US liberal feminism tradition) for the neoliberal regime, offering a distinctively gendered dimension to the mantra of individualism, the market and competition as well as updating the now old-fashioned ‘family values’ vocabularies associated with social conservatism. These are old-fashioned for a number of reasons. For a start female labour power is far too important to the post-industrial economy for anyone to be an advocate of long-term stay-at-home wives and mothers. Moreover spurred on by rise of feminism from the mid 1970s onwards, women expressed a strong desire to work. With the high rate of divorce having a career not just provides women with an income and independence it also reduces the cost of welfare to government. It thus makes sense for government to champion women who will enter the labour market and stay in it. In this context the new ‘corporate’ feminism supports and extends the dominance of contemporary neoliberalism. If it runs into some difficulties when confronted, for example by religious lobbies and by individual politicians of both sexes opposed to abortion, (or similar issues), these are surmountable obstacles, where choice, empowerment and a commitment to ‘planned parenthood’ are uppermost. Imperative to this new neoliberal feminism is its stand and status in regard to its imagined other, the Muslim woman assumed to be

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7 These institutions speak to and across each other on an almost daily basis, eg a story in the Daily Mail will often be picked up and referred to by the PM in the House of Commons in the following days.
oppressed and subjected to various forms of domination and control. Various feminist scholars writing in the context of the post 9/11 world have referred to this as the instrumentalisation of feminism, and Jasbir Puar has reflected on the strategic value of homonationalism, and the instrumentalisation of gay and lesbian rights as a means by which western governments, particularly the US can assert a kind of global progressive superiority.¹ What I am interested to chart here is the way in which, working through a number of powerful media channels, political parties and forces of the mainstream right primarily, in my account, the British Conservatives, but also elsewhere in Europe eg the German Christian Democrats are able to re-vitalise and modernise the conservative agenda through adopting a weak version of feminism which in turn permits a new kind of more attentive address to women⁸.

**Revolutionary Road?**

In what follows I introduce the analysis of family values and neoliberal feminism first by briefly considering the 2009 film *Revolutionary Road* (dir Sam Mendes). I then look back at some strands of (second wave) socialist-feminist writing on the family from the late 1970s. This is followed by a section on the Foucault tradition especially the late 1970s biopolitics lectures and the concept of human capital. And then as a tool for understanding the new address to mothers as active sexual subjects (expressed through body culture) as well as them being pro-active in the economic sense (in the workforce) I propose ‘visual media governmentality’ as a regulatory space for the formulation and working through of many of these ideas. It is here that the benchmarks and boundaries of female success are established, it is here that new norms of failure symbolised in the abject body of the ‘single mother’ and in the bodies of her untidy children or ‘brood’ are to be found. In this visual field vulnerability and dependency are graphically equated with personal carelessness, with being overweight, and badly dressed, and these in turn become ‘performance indicators’ signalling inadequate life planning, and what Wendy Brown calls ‘mismanaged lives’.²

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¹ Though on the part of Angela Merkel there is resistance to accepting a direct connection with feminism, see www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/europe/article3756129.ece

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Why *Revolutionary Road*? This is a film positioned somewhere between the popular middlebrow, quasi-independent films associated with the *Working Title* productions of Richard Curtis, films often appealing primarily to women, and a more art-house genre. This generic slot promises a largely female, middle class, possibly university-educated audience. Such are the complex economies of film production and distribution today that there are multiple strands of accompanying publicity and snippets of information widely disseminated across a range of media forms, at the time of the cinematic release, with the result that films become remarkably open-ended, cultural objects. *Revolutionary Road* re-united two of Hollywood’s most famous actors already known for their previous performance in *Titanic*, and in this sense the stars Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio bring to the film a whole set of both sexual and romantic expectations. The director Sam Mendes was at the time married to Kate Winslet and the film itself is about marital discord. Mendes is known for his directing of *American Beauty*, and he is regarded as someone with a liberal sensibility. Both *American Beauty* and *Revolutionary Road*, have small casts, like stage-plays and they are prepared to tackle difficult emotional situations, underscored by a recognition of the place for, and impact of, sexual politics. If *American Beauty* told a story of post-feminist heterosexual family life, *Revolutionary Road* turns the director’s gaze back in time to pre-(liberal)-feminist USA. Based on a highly regarded novel published in 1962 by US writer Richard Yates *Revolutionary Road* offers the opportunity to reflect on a move from the founding moments of white, middle class, US liberal feminism, to its contemporary transformation into neoliberal feminism. It is a film which has as its subtext a range of feminist issues, serving as a reminder of the gains made in the moment coming directly after the period in which the film is set. It is not so much that it anticipates feminism rather that it shows why US liberal feminism when it finally exploded into being, took the shape it did. It is therefore an immanent narrative fuelled by an unspeakable desire for something, which could only be a sexual politics to come. The timing of its production, the themes which the director does not quite bring to the surface, but leaves that space to be filled by audience inference, as well as a press comment by Kate Winslet that she read *The Feminine Mystique* in preparation for the role of April, suggest that the producers of such a multi-million dollar production as this could be persuaded that it
would be a box-office success\textsuperscript{9}. Set in the mid 1950s there is however no evoking of nostalgia. Winslet’s wardrobe is carefully chosen to both constrain her within that pre-feminist moment of conservative femininity while also suggesting her pushing at the boundaries of convention. She is more urban and elegant than her neighbours, and her clothes encapsulate her yearning to be somewhere else. This is a film located in that US post-war suburban moment as a pre-feminist stage before the storm bursts, and it depicts a litany of feminist concerns explored through the character of April, but without naming them as such.

The couple April and Frank find themselves locked into a lifestyle which bears all the marks of post-war American affluence, and all the rigidities of gender and sexuality which underpinned the new nuclear family of the period. April’s hopes for a career in acting are dashed after a humiliation in a local amateur dramatics, she also sees that her husband is unfulfilled in his desk job and so she proposes a move to Paris. April’s enthusiasm is first curbed by the hard work she has to do to win her husband over to this plan, and then extinguished when two events follow each other in quick succession, she gets pregnant with a third child and wants an abortion which shocks Frank and he in turn gets an unexpected promotion at work, while also compensating for suburban boredom by enjoying the frisson of adultery with a girl from the office pool. As the relationship crumbles April flirts with one of the neighbours when they find themselves alone together after a couple’s night out, and she has sex with him in the car, rejecting him a few days later. She then infuriates her husband by getting hold of an obstetric vacuum to carry out an abortion and when he confesses to having had an affair, she merely asks him angrily why he bothered to tell her. Paris is no longer an option and in despair April aborts herself, rupturing her womb and haemorrhaging to death. The film closes with shots of the bereaved father Frank now moved to New York city watching his kids play in the park, and the realtor neighbours back in the suburbs commenting that the couple did not really ever fit in.

These are the years before easily available birth control, never mind safe abortions, when ambitious women, with the onset of motherhood, were rarely able to fulfil themselves with a career. The film shows the claustrophobia of family life and

\textsuperscript{9} see bitchmagazine.org/post/re-imagining-revolutionary-road
motherhood as triggers for what was to come, i.e., the women’s movement (or revolution) of the mid-1960s. There is a catalogue of soon-to-be feminist issues. The question of female sexual pleasure is explored when April enjoys seducing her neighbour, but the sex act itself only lasts a few seconds. Once it is done, it is over. Nor does April display any significant affection for her children; maternity is simply something that happened to her unbidden. Overall, the film implicitly makes the strongest argument in favour of divorce. The narrative suggests that female mental health and well-being can depend on being able to exit a marriage, and gain independence, a life of one’s own.

It is the timing of the film that is significant in the context of its reception in the UK and US. The film feeds into current anxieties about the breakdown of marriage and the de-stabilising of family life. It introduces feminist issues for a middle-class audience segment unused to the intrusion of angry sexual politics within the landscape of contemporary cinema. Maybe it introduces gender discord and sexual politics within the ranks of the political right, if the review by Charles Moore in the Daily Telegraph is anything to go by. In any case, my argument here is that the film marks a point of contestation in a popular film culture which for the previous decade has celebrated weddings, and which has humorously portrayed young women’s fears of missing out on marriage and children, and of ‘always being the bridesmaid and never the bride’. Revolutionary Road, with its Hollywood stars, demonstrates its liberal credentials by contesting the sanctity of marriage. The film serves as a reminder of the contribution of liberal feminism to contemporary western women’s freedoms. Through the narrative of April, the film anticipates progress and the ‘revolutionary’ change which was just round the corner. The film reminds its viewers of the idea of progress, there can be no return to a time when married women were trapped in the home with only the chores of babies and housework to punctuate the day. The narrative bolsters a linear model of progress along with the idea of personal or individual liberation. There is a profoundly liberal feminist ‘structure of feeling’ running through Revolutionary Road. Kate Winslet in and out of character offers a powerful point of identification for young, middle-class women today. She is

10 see review of the film 26th Jan 2009 by Charles Moore in the Daily Telegraph www.telegraph.co.uk › Comment › Columnists › Charles Moore
11 from Four Weddings and a Funeral (dir. Mike Newell 1994,) to Bridget Jones dir Sharon MacGuire 2001) to Bridesmaids (dir Paul Fleig 2011).
beautiful and successful, and she exudes an aura of being a passionate and independent woman, as Daily Mail sourly notes, following the recent announcement of her pregnancy, she will soon be the mother of three children all of whom have different fathers, a ‘3x3’.

The Nursery as Socialist Ideal

I have argued that contemporary neoliberalism in its bid for deeper embedding as a new kind of common-sense, enters into a kind of symbiotic relationship with liberal feminism. I have also pointed to the significant role allocated to the professional middle class mother in this hegemony-building exercise. But who exactly is she? We could point to the modes of visibility and publicity management which surround leading politicians’ wives, such as Michelle Obama, Samantha Cameron and Miriam Clegg. We could also include COO of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg in this list of female ‘highflyers’ (as the press describes them) mothers who, whether temporarily on sabbatical from their careers, or else are ‘juggling’ and combining work with motherhood, nevertheless embark on the latter with professional attention to duty, responsibility and all the skills required to ensure a stable upbringing for children. In effect they are called upon to be ‘exemplary’ mothers within a political culture intent on reversing family breakdown, and on encouraging better and more effective parenthood. But it is the website www.mumsnet.co.uk which most precisely embodies this new role of professional middle class maternity, and which now has achieved the status as a mother’s lobby. This model of maternal citizenship is counter-posed in the popular press and tabloids, as I have already noted above, by an abject maternal figure typically a single mother with several children fathered by different men, reliant on benefits, living in a council house, and with an appearance which suggests lack of attention to body image, all of which within today’s moral universe imply fecklessness, promiscuity and inadequate parenting. The Daily Mail once again takes the lead in exposing these examples of bad mothering, many of whom are shown either to be cheating the welfare system, bringing up delinquent children, never having had a job or else having failed to provide their children with reliable father figures. In a recent edition the Daily Mail commissioned respected British Asian

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12 A detailed piece of feminist ethnographic research on this website would be both timely and useful.
writer and broadcaster Yasmin Alibhai-Brown to spend a day in a neighbourhood known colloquially as a ‘man desert’ given the disproportionate number of single mothers, many of whom in this case where black\textsuperscript{13}. More often articles like this rely on photographs of unruly-looking children alongside a tired and ‘ungroomed’ mother, where, as Bev Skeggs would argue ungroomed has become synonymous with unrespectable and morally deficient working class femininity (2005)\textsuperscript{14}.

This whole vista of information, publicity and ‘news’ exists within a frame where social and political affairs merge into, often to be overtaken by, the world of entertainment and celebrity culture. In effect some of the most pressing social issues of our times such as ‘welfare reform’ are wrapped up in a confection of what used to be known as ‘tit-bits’, gossip, in a contemporary version of what Richard Hoggart in 1957 referred to as the traditional ‘Peg’s Paper’ style of reading material designed for a large popular female readership and audience\textsuperscript{15}. An allusion to Hoggart is actually appropriate because what is also entirely missing from this new world of either exemplary or shameful maternity is the figure of the strong, working class mother, the kind of stalwart of the community which Hoggart described so vividly and before him DH Lawrence. Not particularly concerned about her appearance, often tired, sometimes holding down several poorly paid jobs at once, making sure her children were well fed and got the best opportunities, this figure has almost gone from the popular imagination. She lingers on only as the occasional character in TV soap opera such as Coronation Street and when she does make an appearance in other TV genres it is as the hard-pressed Mum in need of a make-over, whose children or husband will connive with the TV presenters to offer her the chance for some radical transformation which will bring her up to the standard of glamorous visual appearance now required to count as a woman today, in short she is subjected to the normalising horizon of beauty culture which brings working class woman somehow within reach of middle class aspiration, sexual attractiveness and hence social acceptability\textsuperscript{16}. The disappearance of the working class mother, as someone with any public voice or visibility never mind the respect and dignity such a figure once had in leftwing

\textsuperscript{13} see the Daily Mail online www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/.../My-week-man-desert-In-parts-Britain-70-ch...
\textsuperscript{14} see Bev Skeggs 2005 ‘The Making of Class and Gender Through Visualising Moral Subject Formation’ in Sociology 39, 965
\textsuperscript{15} Uses of Literacy by Richard Hoggart 1957
\textsuperscript{16} see Skeggs 2005 as above and McRobbie 2008
thought as well as in literature, in drama and in cinema, is instructive in this shifting political universe where social democracy is in decline, where welfare is widely targeted as wasteful and where there are fewer voices in politics, media or in public policy fields defending these principles.

To unpack further the starkness of this transformation and the withdrawal of compassion and support to women who as mothers find themselves trapped in welfare dependency we need to reflect on the historical relationship which existed between both radical and social democratic politics and feminism especially with regard to maternity, for the reason that it is this set of intersecting political forces which has been trounced and overshadowed by the ascendancy of the new right, the centre right, and the centre left inaugurated by the Clinton government in the US (with its singling out of ‘welfare queens’ as the focus of attention in the bid to make workfare the only option) and followed up as the Third Way during the Blair years. Indeed we cannot under-estimate the zeal with which the Blair government set about dismantling old Labour allegiances including the perhaps even romanticised place occupied by the working class mother. This also involved a scornful repudiation of feminism and a discarding of the value and place for labour history. Of course it is not as though feminism had ever existed in comfortable harmony with the Labour Party. The schisms between Labour and the extra-parliamentary left including the socialist-feminists from the 1970s through to the 1990s are well documented. Most of the best known writing on feminism and the family emerged from Marxist-feminist scholarship including the work of Elizabeth Wilson, Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, and also the historical writing of Denise Riley and Anna Davin. None of these writers were directly connected to the Labour Party and many were fiercely critical of the reformist tendencies of social democracy. Yet this divide was not entirely impermeable, by the mid 1980s several Marxist groups had dissolved and entered the Labour Party (the influential International Marxist Group) while the British Communist Party including the well-known feminist journalist Bea Campbell shared many political platforms and indeed journals with prominent figures inside Labour, especially as it moved to embrace the more mainstream Euro-communism. If the heroic years of the Labour Party was the post-war period then it is also the case that through these decades inside and alongside the party there were many activists and campaigners committed to improving living standards for families, especially
those who found themselves in financial hardship. It was women inside Labour who also lobbied to ensure that Child Benefits could be paid direct to the mother, and who fought hard to establish pre-school provision, especially in low income neighbourhoods. The Child Poverty Action Group was influential for many years and for a period was headed by Ruth Lister a highly regarded feminist scholar as well as campaigner who for decades has been involved in (among other things) defending poor, single mothers against attempts by government to push them into work despite the difficulties in securing good quality full time nursery provision. The Blair period of modernisation set in place a momentum which marginalised, discredited or cast as old-fashioned this kind of feminist policy work, with the result that apart from the Women’s Budget Group and the ‘gender mainstreaming’ (ie liberal feminist) platform led by feminist sociologist Sylvia Walby, women’s voices were muted and more or less ignored. This demise is arguably a key factor in the rise of the new binaries of good and bad motherhood which now litter the popular press and media. Despite the emergence of new feminist online campaigners and activists in the last five years, little of their attention has been paid to defending poor women against cuts to welfare. Nor have these online organisations tackled the disapproval and disapprobation of poor, single mothers, or challenged the glamorisation of motherhood found across the popular media which concentrates only on the super-wealthy and celebrities who have access to as many nannies as they need. Feminist public policy research in journals such as Critical Social Policy does span this range of topics, interrogating for example the wider impact of this negative stereotyping of single mothers, and there have also been a number of articles in MAMSIE challenging the new moral landscape of motherhood. What is missing is a wider contextualisation of the demonisation of the disadvantaged within a socio-cultural framework which charts not just the decline of social democracy, an enormous loss to British political life, but also the fact that this passing away is strangely unmarked and hence unmourned.

18 Patricia Hewitt meeting at House of Commons, see below.
If we do pay attention to what was a defining feature of the UK welfare state in the early years, ie the important place occupied by women and children as rightful subjects of entitlements and benefits, we can also be reminded nevertheless of how the social security system was predicated on a male breadwinner model, which by the late 1970s was being challenged by socialist feminists who argued for women to participate fully in the labour force as a means of gaining and retaining economic independence. With this the question of childcare provision suddenly comes to the forefront. Three key texts of this period reflect exactly the terrain of debate, Elizabeth Wilson’s *Women and the Welfare State* (1977) Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh’s *The Anti Social Family* (1982) and Denise Riley’s *War in the Nursery* (1987).\(^4\) Riley’s rich historical account charted the angry debates that raged within the ranks of the medical experts, psychoanalysts and other professionals about the role of nursery care, and this in turn brought to the attention of feminists the idea of ‘socialised childcare’ something also associated with Communist states. This idea found great favour within different strands of feminism in the UK for various reasons, first that only full-time nursery care freed women to enter employment, gain economic independence, and pursue uninterrupted careers thus fulfilling their potential as equal to men in work and in professional life, second that the nursery environment was beneficial for children allowing them to gain social skills and escape the over-heated and exclusive emotional connection with the mother, and third that exclusive motherhood was in any case a trap for women, an exhausting, unrewarding role, one of servitude without pay. Well-organised nursery provision was a socialist idea, almost from the start. Nursery provision was a key feature of both feminist discourse and of wider public policy discussion for more than forty years. Labour governments had seen nursery care as a way of improving the health and well-being of children from poor families while also allowing women to work and hence contribute to family incomes. While feminist theorists, especially Elizabeth Wilson, pointed to the policing role of welfare as it intruded into the lives of working-class families, there was nevertheless a consistent support within feminism for state-provided nursery care alongside paid maternity leave, and other related provisions.

*The Anti-Social Family* is also instructive to look back at, not just because it tackles the oppressive aspects of domesticity and the ‘tyranny of maternity’ but because it acknowledges the exclusions for lesbian women who at the time had few possibilities
for maternity and who also suffered the stigma of childlessness. In many ways this book articulates the divide between the perceived privileges of heterosexual feminism and its championing of motherhood as a priority within feminism, and the pre-queer dynamics of marginalisation from normative family life. At the same time Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh fully recognise the apparently endless ‘popularity’ of the family in everyday life and the unlikelihood of its demise. In the light of this seemingly consensual enjoyment of the domestic sphere, feminists arguably withdrew from extreme anti or alternative-family positions and instead became involved in campaigns which supported mothers through a range of measures notably maternity leave, flexible working hours, as well as access to affordable childcare. I stress this historical trajectory not as an uninterrupted pathway but rather to emphasise the troubled but nevertheless anchored connection between feminism and the pro-active policies associated with social democratic governments which supported women’s movement into work from the early 1970s onwards and concomitant with this recognised pre-school childcare as socially as well as financially beneficial.

What has happened in the last decade in regard to this configuration of once powerful forces is instructive. The feminist emphasis on the ‘tyranny of maternity’ as Barrett and McIntosh put it, is wildly unspeakable, as is the portrayal of housework and childcare as drudgery. It would be interesting to speculate as to why there is at present, despite various other feminist actions, no organisation or campaign which addresses the oppressive, repetitive, exhausting nature of daily housework and childcare and the extent to which women are still disproportionately responsible for these daily responsibilities. Perhaps this can be attributed to the legacy of a post-feminist culture which emphasises responsibility and choice. As various sociologists have argued, structural issues are transformed into personal matters for which private solutions must be found20. The ideological force of choice has a de-socialising and de-politicising function. But more emphatically the idea of affordable socialised childcare (ie mass nursery care) as a universal provision is also unthinkable, for the reasons of its socialist, communist and welfare-ist heritage, and thus its cost to the state. In this context the idea of full time nursery provision for babies and toddlers,

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20 see Bauman 2001 and Beck 2002
has been conveniently discredited as harmful to children. And yet this model provided the single most effective route out of poverty for disadvantaged and single parent households. For mothers to be fully participating in the labour market there has to be an extensive and well run programme of child care and after school care. Without this working mothers will always have mixed feelings about prioritising wage labour.

The nexus of social democratic and feminist politics which was for many years a defining feature of Labour policies in the UK, shaping the nature of thinking on families, welfare and maternity, found itself at least by-passed, if not thrown out by the forces of modernisation associated with the Blair period. Banal phrases like the ‘work-life balance’ came to replace more sustained debate about how motherhood and work could realistically be combined, without women jeopardising their opportunities in the workplace. Implicitly, as Rosemary Crompton suggested, there was a return to gender traditionalism as women were urged to compromise in the workplace so as to maintain a dual role, this being a step back from all feminist arguments for gender equality and the equal sharing of domestic roles. No one at the time was prepared to argue loudly for men to compromise on their careers or prospects for promotion in favour of sharing all household responsibilities, as to say such a thing would merely confirm a feminist anti-men stance which during the Blair years was quite unacceptable within the landscape of Westminster politics. To sum up, to understand the new family values of the present moment it is necessary to look back to the New Labour period and to the way in which previous historical affiliations between social democracy and feminism which aimed to support women as mothers were dismantled and discredited. This opened the pathway for the present day demonisation of welfare as though to suggest that relying on support or subsidy is somehow shameful. Thus families need to take responsibility for their own affairs and not look to the state for ‘hand outs’. At the same time there is a widely disseminated discourse which celebrates choice and the privatisation of childcare through the use of

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21 Oliver James in The Guardian 8/1/2005 ‘Putting Under 3s in Full-time Daycare Can Promote Aggressive Behavior’ see www.guardian.co.uk › Life & style › Health & wellbeing

22 I attended a roundtable meeting hosted by Patricia Hewitt MP (and at the time Cabinet Minister) at the House of Commons in 2002 to discuss the place of feminism in labour politics. Hewitt commented on the difficulties on being heard on this issue by the PM Tony Blair and those close to him, see also Claire Annesley et al (eds) 2007.
nannies. The granting of marital and parental rights to lesbian and gay couples, while important and just, has consolidated a kind of hermetic ideal of family life which undercuts the older social democratic systems of provision for families outside the family such as youth clubs, girls groups, and a wide array of leisure facilities such as municipal swimming pools, tennis courts, libraries and community centres.

Good Housekeeping: The Biopolitics of the Family

Feminist historians, such as Anna Davin, Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff have investigated the entanglements of class, race and sexuality which have accompanied the politics of maternity and family life over a period of more than two hundred years. This influential work has pinpointed, among other things, the exemplary status accorded to the middle class family, especially in the Victorian period, and the maternal citizenship role allocated to the virtuous mother who was also the ‘angel in the house’. To the feminist sociologist however the writing of Foucault and scholars influenced by him allows for an extrapolation from history so that certain reiterated processes can be gleaned as central to the ‘birth of the social’ and to contemporary modes of managing the family. The disciplining of unruly, excessively fertile, female, working class or colonial bodies entailed for example an accumulation and organisation of knowledge, as well as the training of experts to administer various techniques designed to rein in and control this sexual activity. As we know from Foucault huge apparatuses of the state came into being to form a government of populations with the nuclear family unit replacing the proliferation of wild and deviant sexualities, all of which were to be censored as the ‘parental bedroom’ took precedence as the sanctified space for the satisfaction of desires. Donzelot writing about 19thC France followed this line of argument showing how the new administrative class struggled with the unruly habits of working class women who on the one hand too easily abandoned their own babies into the care of the state while at the same time provided defective or inadequate care to their middle class charges who they are paid both to wet nurse and to look after through childhood. The fear of inculcation of bad habits to the future dominant class led to action being taken to give new status and responsibility to the middle class mother herself, to in effect make

23 see Anna Davin in History Workshop Journal 1978, and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall 2002
24 Foucault History of Sexuality Vol 1 1978
official her role, encouraging a close relationship with the medical profession and thus putting her in charge of the ‘future of the race’. Neither Foucault nor Donzelot draw attention to the historical genre of the women’s magazine as the point of dissemination for this educative and instructive activity. It has been the task of feminist scholars to undertake this task, looking at the various technologies of the ‘advice column’ or the ‘problem page’ as instrumental in the training of middle class young women. Practices of cleanliness, hygiene, and the whole business of good housekeeping were the focus of attention in these pages, and this was extended, according to the precise class location of readers, to include fashion, beauty and rituals around the social calendar and courtship. Not only has this genre provided the format for modern-day women’s magazine and TV programmes it has also demonstrated the centrality of looking as well as reading, to this realm of informal domestic and personal pedagogy. The question remains however as to how these forms functioned as ‘dividing practices’ demarcating and policing the boundaries of class and ethnicity, censoring inappropriate knowledges and removing from the gaze of the middle class readership unsuitable material. Here we could point to the editor emerging as an important figure within the ranks of the professional-managerial class, the person who both exemplifies and oversees this field of feminine taste and decorum. A strong argument could be made that the intoxicating pleasures of fashion, fabric and home-making found inside these pages came to the attention of the lower classes and subsequently had a powerful impact in diverting working class girls and women’s desires in the direction of emulating middle class lifestyle, with the result that female working class identity came to be experienced as inferior rather than being a site for political consciousness. From the work of Carolyn Steedman to Beverly Skeggs to bell hooks writing about black women’s desire for finery, this realm of anxiety and desire emerges as a defining feature of normative and lived femininity, taking the form of a yearning to be middle class and thereby suggesting that the power of popular media succeeds in its attempts to ‘de-proletarianise’ society.

Foucault’s Biopolitics Lectures delivered in the mid 1970s also focus on good housekeeping as part of the neoliberal programme developed through the writing of the Ordoliberals in Germany in the early 1930s. Roepke for example saw the family

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25 for example (to come)
26 see Carolyn Steedman 1986, Bev Skeggs 2005, as above, bell hooks 2007
as to be managed along the lines of a small business or enterprise, and Foucault describes the human capital of the child as an ‘abilities machine’. This notion of enterprise is, argues Foucault, central to the programme of neoliberalisation, and if we move away from these historical examples to the present day it is possible to see that by casting the family as a small business a new rationale for ‘gender re-traditionalisation’ emerges as Lisa Adkins has persuasively shown.\(^\text{27}\) The family becomes a kind of unit or team, a partnership of equals, even if this means a stay home Mum and full-time working father. In contemporary parlance such a traditional arrangement reflects a team decision, one which could be easily reversed. Once again the emphasis Foucault places on human capital permits an account of how new norms of middle-class life are directed towards young women. There is for example, a more intense investment in marriage, motherhood and domestic life, as a benchmark of successful femininity. This validates at least a retreat from the idea of combining full-time successful careers with motherhood, and it gives new, more professional, status to full-time mothers while opening up avenues for extensive media discussion of ‘intensive mothering’ and at the same time creating new markets (child-friendly coffee shops and so-called ‘school run fashion’ for the so-called ‘yummy mummies’). These markets also extend to push-chairs which double as jogging machines, sexy underwear ranges for pregnant women,\(^6\) new more fashion-oriented parenting magazines as well as a host of website organisations. The professionalisation of domestic life forcefully reverses the older feminist denunciation of housework as drudgery, and childcare as monotonous and never-ending by elevating domestic skills and the bringing up of children as worthwhile and enjoyable. The well run ‘corporate family’ endorses the ‘intensification of mothering’ as a mode of investment in the human capital of infants and children, while also countering any presumed loss of status on the part of the stay home mother who now directs her professional skills to ensure the unassailable middle class status of her children. She will not be a complainer, nor will she be ‘down among the woman’ as Fay Weldon darkly put it.

Contemporary neoliberal discourse as it is addressed to young women (for example in the words of Sheryl Sandberg) emphasises the importance of planning well for marriage and motherhood, and this now includes, in a gesture towards liberal

\(^{27}\) Lisa Adkins 1999
feminism, finding the right kind of partner who will be prepared to consider his wife as an equal. The dispositif of new maternal-familialism is inextricably tied up with expansive norms of respectable middle-class life, which in turn entails careful financial planning, good self-governance to insure against family breakdown, along with the increasing professionalisation of motherhood which sets new horizons for middle-class status on the basis of aspirational lifestyle, non-reliance on the state or on benefits and a female head of household who can ‘do it all’ even if she cannot quite ‘have it all’. There is frequently some irony and ‘feminist’ self-consciousness in the recounting of the rewards good housekeeping. The UK popular press and TV function as the debating chamber for these maternal transformations, the luminosities of visual culture show again and again, day in and day out, the triumph of the ‘post baby body’, or the favoured looks for the ‘school run’, the modern woman is not ‘that name’ unless she is in possession of a well-dressed toddler or ‘mini me’. We could go further and say that cultural intelligibility as a young woman is now tilted towards the achievement of ‘affluent, middle class maternity’ with its many accoutrements in particular a spectacularly slim body, a well groomed and manicured appearance, with an equally attractive baby and husband. Motherhood no longer offers a short time-off period of respite from those forms of social power which comprise incitements and persuasions to get back in shape and to resume the work of achieving the highly sexualised body image which is now a hallmark of successful womanhood. Quite the opposite, as Jo Littler points out the young mother must now avoid at all costs the danger of ‘dowdiness’ and this requires many hours of hard work in retaining her sexual desirability at all times. It is almost too obvious a point to make that the emphasis on vigilant attention being paid to heteronormative desirability on the part of the wife and mother also functions to encourage marital fidelity and hence family stability. The wife is expected to remain highly desirable at all points in time during and after pregnancy, while once again just to stress the asymmetry of these norms no such constant and repeated addresses are made to the male partners. The post-feminist masquerade of maternity re-assures the social structures of domination by constraining young mothers in a field of anxieties brought about by the promise of ‘complete perfection’. This luminosity of contemporary femininity shines it light unsparingly, its significance stretches well beyond the pages of the women’s magazines because at stake in these practices are matters of state, undertaken within the new moral economy of the family.
With the evisceration of the public sector and the slimming down to the point of extinction of a range of family services, the expectation is that the family steps forward to look after itself and to inculcate the right kinds of self-responsibility in its children while at the same time financially mopping up those costs which in the past would have been at least partially covered by the state. The middle class family, as it was in the 19th C, becomes a more self contained complex financial unit requiring extensive lines of dependency and obligation, in the form of loans, bequests, gifts and underwriting. This reverses some of what Ulrich Beck wrote about in his theory of reflexive modernisation\textsuperscript{10} wherein individualisation was made possible by the expansive welfarist undertakings (education, social services, public housing, employment benefits) which freed the young to make a life for themselves often far away from the close ties of family and community associated with first modernity.\textsuperscript{11} It is incumbent on the now professional mother to stage-manage and oversee the success of this kind of family enterprise. There is a prevailing sense that suggests this scenario is bound to be beneficial to children, ensuring a better outcome, a good university place and thus a well-paid job. There is also an insinuation echoing across the media that the feminist generation prioritised their own careers at the expense of their children, ‘farming them out’ to full-time nurseries. Unsurprisingly there is no mention here of those women who cannot afford not to work, never mind the huge numbers of single parent families where the mother is the sole breadwinner, such women as these make almost no appearance in the public debates which have taken place in recent years. This is also true of women from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, with the result that the discussion about maternity is almost wholly conducted by white women.\textsuperscript{12} The key role in recession times of families being more responsible for themselves, more enterprising and taking over the costs which in times of more extensive social democratic government would have been covered by the state, is then an important aspect of neoliberalism within the domestic sphere.

In the light of the above discussion and moving towards a conclusion it becomes apparent that there needs to be a more developed theorisation of media (and social media) in relation to the question of neoliberal feminism and ‘mediated maternity’.
By introducing the phrase ‘visual-media governmentality’, I want to conjoin the biopolitical model of governmentality developed by Foucault, with its attention to spaces, gazes, bodies, populations, and the overseeing of conduct and activity, with the specific dimension of gender and media. In the first instance this would mean returning to Jacqueline Rose’s psychoanalytic account of how the girlhood acquisition of femininity is never fully achieved, can always be somehow distracted from its point of fixity which in turn accounts for the wide range of regulative mechanisms put into place to ensure that normative femininity is indeed achieved. Rose’s Lacanian account stresses processes of repetitive looking. The girl must be constantly looking at images which confirm her otherwise uncertain sense of self. Alongside this we could pose Butler’s queer theory of gender performativity in such a way that it does not supplant or negate Rose, but instead accents the crafting, scripting and repetitive inciting of gender norms as fictitious, but institutionally embedded social practices, required so that heterosexual domination can be instated and maintained. Femininity exists then as a seemingly fundamental and universal dividing practice, one which within the time and space of western modernity has been constantly produced and reproduced by the various offices of the state and by the giant media corporations. The history of girls and women’s magazines as social institutions, stand as a shining example of how femininity has been created as a seemingly distinctive separate space, one which charts the chronology of women’s lives for them, while also punctuating the week or month with repetitive familiarity. It is this format which is both expanded and more intensively visualised in the age of online communications, Instagram, Facebook, and the Daily Mail’s Femail section which reproduces and in many ways replaces the traditional format of the women’s magazine, now available as a constant feed of images, updated hourly, and in recent times, concentrating almost exclusively on showing pictures of glamorous and famous young women either in stages of pregnancy or just after the birth when they are displaying their slim, ‘toned’ ‘post-baby’ bodies. Female viewers are invited into this mode of repetitive looking, well beyond the years of girlhood.

28 J Rose 1986
29 J Butler 1990
30 The titles of magazines from Just 17, 19, Elle, to Good Housekeeping itself tells us something about this chronologisation of women’s lives.
This landscape of power is intensified and made more complex in the age of digital and social media, but also by the way in which neoliberal governmentality inserts itself firmly within the domestic sphere, eroding the previous boundaries of public and private, of politics and entertainment, by establishing a site of cosy, convergence, a politics of ‘daytime TV’ expressed, once again, during the Blair period in his preference for interviews being conducted ‘on the sofa’. Deleuze described the ‘control of communications’ as the most forceful modality of biopolitical power. Within the spaces of contemporary communication, flows of gossip intersect with and coincide with matters of great urgency, to the point that the ‘fun effect’ often seriously compromises and detracts from questions of gravity. Boundaries are eroded and moral confusion sets in. Political discourse cannot be separated from trivial comments about the appearance, age or sexual desirability of key protagonists. At the same time the old-fashioned more anonymous and formal modes of political engagement such as those associated with the bureaucratic years of social democracy where women often worked behind the scenes quietly pursuing a feminist agenda are now replaced by the need to personalise all activities, put a name on and a face to everything one does, to gain publicity or followers, likes or dislikes in the full glare of the global media. To be effective requires going public, being constantly available and highly visible and this in turn requires modes of self-branding and self-promotion which lessens the public service dimension of traditional political activity. There is no option it seems but to launch oneself into this sphere of entertainment if one wants to take part in public debate. Few aspects of everyday life and working life are now exempt from this requirement to self-promote. This has consequences for the more branded and personalised feminism which now surfaces in recent years and which comes immediately to be attached to certain names and careers. Feminists speaking out become immediately identifiable. Feminism is now a heavily named or signatured activity, where in the past the ‘collective’ sufficed.

This is the context within which Sandberg’s book *Lean In* has been published, attracting enormous publicity across most of the quality press and TV on the basis of her position as the Chief Operating Officer at Facebook in California. Using the term lean-in as a rejoinder to women not to psychologically disconnect from work and from the career path at the point at which motherhood beckons, and more generally as a call to women in the workplace to position themselves close to those who are in
leadership positions, so that they will be noticed, the book has given rise to so-called Lean In circles taking place in many US cities, a ghostly version of its more overtly feminist predecessor the consciousness raising group of the 1970s. Likewise the TED talks she has given have attracted more than Im viewers on YouTube (see www.youtube/TED). The singularity of Sandberg’s account is that it brings an unashamedly feminist voice to a genre of writing which is associated with top US business schools and MBA courses, which despite the high status of such institutions, relies on a writing style which eschews conventional scholarship or for that matter reportage, in favour of cheerful and uplifting anecdotes, helpful tips, homilies, sentimental eulogies to mentors and others who have helped the author in the course of her career, while also name-dropping the litanies of impressive friends and acquaintances within the ranks of the rich and powerful, all of which is set within a format which carefully avoids saying anything mildly critical of, or detrimental to, her employer. The adoption of the business manual format is certainly almost risible from the perspectives of most women who would define themselves as feminist, and who have taken part in any form of feminist politics over the years, and this accounted for the hostile or dismissive reviews of the book which appeared in liberal newspapers such as the Guardian and other similar newspapers and online sites across the world.

The simple use of a vocabulary drawn from the world of business and then applied not just to how women can do better in the world of work but also in home life, suggests the extent to which corporate values have achieved a fundamental centrality and seemingly uncontestable as well as uncontentious status. Where in the past almost all strains of feminism including liberal feminist would have found just cause to challenge the culture of the male-dominated business world, in Sandberg’s case this is no longer the case. From her perspective feminism means finding better ways of adjusting to this business culture, not to try to change it, and when change is proposed it must always also be good for business, at least insofar as it extracts better performance from the workforce. The most significant point the book makes is that women in the organisations for which Sandberg has worked, no matter how well qualified, anticipating the difficulties they will encounter when they have children, begin to detach from the job in advance of that time at which they will become pregnant and then have some time off (though barely more than a few weeks in the US). In doing so women needlessly jeopardise their chances for re-gaining their roles
and promotional prospects, where with greater confidence and self-belief they could somehow manage the transition to combining work and motherhood. Sandberg argues then for ‘leaning in’ and this in turn becomes a wider metaphor for women who, in the context of corporate life, still show signs of insecurity and unconfidence. Much of the book repeats the early feminist observations, cast in terms of a social psychology of gender, where women fear disapproval or fear being seen as aggressive and unfeminine because they want to be liked. Instead of rounding in on the rituals of male corporate bonding and the deep rooted sexism which thrives on stereotypes about ‘scary women’ Sandberg’s advice is typically to find ways of outmanoeuvring these obstacles, through such strategies as smiling while also ‘staying focused’. Her own career from Harvard onwards and then working her way through some of the key companies and organisations in the US, including the World Bank, the US Treasury, McKinsey, Google and then Facebook means that she is now one of the most powerful (and well paid) businesswomen in the US if not in the world. What she says to other women is to learn how to play the corporate game more deftly, this may mean being willing to take on new challenges rather than saying ‘I’m not ready’, it will also mean being willing to re-enter the labour market after a period out for children, at a lower scale, on the basis that this can then be a stepping stone for re-gaining the status or pay point lost on taking time out.

Sandberg shows her liberal feminist credentials by describing her own modest background and she sheer hard work and long hours she put in to make her way to the top. Prior to having children she routinely did more than 14 hour days in the office and even though she also learnt how to be more productive on fewer hours in the workplace following motherhood, she repeatedly talks about how she still returns to the laptop after reading her children their bedtime stories. She insists that children do not suffer from having a hard working mother, she admits to ‘feeling sad’ when she doesn’t see enough of her kids, she makes the point that she does her best to get home in time for the evening meal (though she does not mention the routines of shopping, cooking and clearing up, such that the reader can only infer she has staff). Having ‘good help’ is essential and she is also in the fortunate position of having extended family close by in the same neighbourhood. She counsels women to look for the right kind of husband who will willingly share the housework and childcare, and she also suggests bringing ‘negotiating strategies’ to the marriage and home front when it
comes to trying to find a way to combine successful motherhood with ‘workplace success’. The liberal feminist message delivered to the heartland of this neoliberal world is that women can continue to be economically active, and highly successful, during the early years of having children, they need not lose out as long as they learn how to ‘lean in’. The words ‘daycare’ never mind ‘state provided nurseries’ do not appear across the pages of the book, instead there is simply a reference or two to the need for getting ‘good help’. Sandberg’s tone is positive, cheerful, uplifting and wholeheartedly feminist in that she earnestly wants to improve women’s lives. But there is a whole vocabulary which describes the world of non-elite labour which is totally missing from her writing, this includes such words as poverty and unemployment, the high cost and often low quality of childcare, the reliance of white middle class elite women on the low paid domestic labour of migrant women, many of whom will be separated from their own children in order to earn a living and hence unable themselves to provide ‘quality parenting’ and so on. Nothing at all is said about the non-existence of paid maternity leave for women in the US, or about the need for employer-provided crèches and nurseries, as if that would be a step too far in the direction of criticism of corporate culture and the business world. Sandberg does not even suggest local neighbourhood, or self help nursery care, instead there is a doggedness about putting in the long hours and working one’s way up the corporate ladder. Implicitly Sandberg is talking to young women like herself, who are attending prestigious universities. This means her address is exclusively to a privileged, largely white, middle class sector of the population. What Sandberg describes as feminist she also inaugurates as a comfortable neoliberal feminism, a political force which is defined in such terms as to protect and enhance the already existing privileges of a relatively select sector of the female population, whose position, especially as they enter into motherhood is now charged with even greater moral responsibility than before, in times of withdrawal of the state and reduction in all public spending. This is a radically de-politicised and accommodating feminism, its conservatism is most apparent in its shying away from argument and confrontation, it merely requests a place at the table. This then has emerged as the public face of neoliberal feminism. Sandberg herself has stayed close to power since her earliest days at university, becoming the research assistant and later close friend of Obama advisor and former Chief Treasurer Larry Summers. Her narrative, scattered as it is with personal biographical details can be seen also as a kind of answer to the question implicitly
posed by *Revolutionary Road* and by Betty Friedan as the ‘problem with no name’. By proudly re-claiming the word feminism and bringing it back into use in the world of business as well as in the home after a long period during which it was cast aside as irrelevant or no longer needed, Sandberg also re-invents the liberal feminism, an American formation, so that it even more fully complies with the values of the corporate environment.

What I have laboured to argue across these pages is that a new maternal-feminine performs a double function for the neoliberal hegemony of the present, by endorsing liberal feminist principles it provides the centre right and the centre left with a more up to date way of engaging with women and women’s issues while simultaneously expunging from popular memory the values of the social democratic tradition which had forged such a close connection with feminism through the pursuit of genuine equality and collective provision for families as a public good. The more professional status accorded to mothers, especially those who for perhaps pragmatic reasons choose to stay home while their children are of pre-school age likewise fulfils a double purpose in that it brings up to date (if with some disruptive effect) the family values agenda, so dear to conservative thinking, while at the same time, in a context where austerity conditions cannot be questioned it encourages family life to be considered in terms of an enterprise or small business led by the wife and mother who provides strong leadership and demonstrates the right kind of managerial skills. Once again what this strenuous ideological activity forecloses and seeks to forget is the very possibility of socialised childcare including after school care, youth clubs and publicly provided leisure facilities as a social investment and a public good. The bombardment of images showing super-wealthy mothers enjoying their luxury lifestyles introduces new forms of consumer hedonism into the hard work of motherhood, distracting attention away from what feminists in the past named as drudgery and as chores. This palliative effect even in its trickle down version, involving routines of play dates, coffee shops and jogging buggies re-instates new norms of middle class hegemony against which less advantaged families can only feel themselves to be inferior or inadequate or else judging themselves as having not tried hard enough. What was in the Victorian era, a moral high ground of maternal citizenship is now re-cast as a no-less-moralistic playground of lifestyle and consumer culture, predicated on young
women making the right choices and adopting, at an early age, the right kind of life-plan.

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1 Puar 2007.
2 Brown 2005. So frequent and repetitive are the articles about ‘single mothers on benefits’ that they become almost unnoticeable eg The Daily Mail 11th June 2013 runs a feature on a mother of seven, with her benefits itemised, allusions are made to absent fathers and attention drawn to her unkempt body and appearance
3 Elizabeth Wilson 1977; Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh 1984; Denise Riley 1987, Anna Davin 1978.
4 Elizabeth Wilson, Women and the Welfare State (1977); Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh, The Anti Social Family (1982); Denise Riley, War in the Nursery (1987). See also What Is to be Done about the Family? (ed by L.Segal, 1983 )
5 Crompton 2004; see also Nancy Fraser 2009 and McRobbie 2008.
7 For a detailed discussion of the ways in which these concerns are played out across the narratives of the successful chick lit and then mumslit or so called ‘hen lit’ genres see Littler 2013.
8 Littler 2013.
10 Beck and E. Beck-Gernscheim 2001
11 Free childcare provided by grandparents for example is only possible if the children to be cared for live close by.
12 In academic feminism there is thankfully a different story to be told, see the extensive work by Ann Phoenix and also the recent publications of Mamsie based at Birkbeck College London, especially the writing of Lisa Baraitser (2009)
13 Deleuze 2002.