Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwoman Became Balanced
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Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwoman Became Balanced

A new trend is on the rise: suddenly high-powered women are publicly espousing feminism and urging renewed public discussion about how to ensure that women can cultivate a better work-family balance. In an era often described as postfeminist, it seems that a feminist debate is currently being revived in the United States.¹ One formative moment in this changing atmosphere was the publication of an article by Anne-Marie Slaughter in the July/August 2012 edition of the Atlantic. In “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” Slaughter describes the reasons behind her decision to leave the State Department at the end of her two-year term as the first female director of policy planning. She returned home to Princeton — where she still held a tenured position in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs — because she simply wanted to spend more time with her husband and two adolescent boys who had not accompanied her to Washington. Slaughter’s personal story prompts an extended articulation of what she argues is a much larger cultural problem in the United States: the fact that high-powered, professional women are still finding it exceedingly difficult to balance

career demands with their desire to also have an active home life. This is not due to any failure on women’s part, Slaughter repeatedly insists, but rather due to social norms surrounding notions of success and the inflexibility of US workplace culture, which (still) values professional advancement over family.

Slaughter’s essay struck a deep cultural chord. It immediately went viral and within a week of its publication, over one million people had accessed the online version. It has since become the most widely read essay in the history of the *Atlantic*. What emerges from an examination of the many and varied responses on different blog sites and comments is a relatively broad consensus that the essay’s power stems from its cogent and succinct articulation of what “having it all” has come to signify for middle-class women in the United States, as well as from its simple explanation of why many professional women continue to feel divided between career and family. As many in the X and Y generations seem intuitively to know, “having it all” for upwardly mobile women has meant—quite mundanely—pursuing a meaningful career and cultivating an intimate family life. Yet, even when women have managed, somehow, to juggle a demanding career with being a “present” mother, Slaughter argues, “having it all” has not translated into Zen-like well-being; it has not brought happiness. Finding a way to “have it all” is difficult enough for most professional women—unless they are “superhuman, rich or self-employed”—but finding a way to “have it all” *happily* is virtually impossible for the vast majority of women.


Indeed, Slaughter “had it all”—a high-level, influential government job and a heteronormative family (two kids and an incredibly supportive husband)—but she reveals that she wasn’t happy because she was spending too much time away from her children. So, Slaughter queries, how can women “combine professional success and satisfaction with a real commitment to family” (italics added)? The answer lies in allowing women themselves to create a felicitous work-family balance by transforming social and workplace norms. While the issues of work-family or work-life balance are nothing new, Slaughter’s emphasis on a felicitous balance as the ideal for progressive contemporary womanhood is. Because, she suggests, women’s relationship to prolonged absence from their children tends to differ from men’s, it is crucial that we, as a society, begin valuing parenthood while simultaneously demanding different work conditions in the United States such as flextime. Such changes would enable women to negotiate a better equilibrium between the private and public aspects of their lives. Asserting the importance of the right balance, moreover, is absolutely instrumental in reinvigorating the forgotten clause of the Declaration of Independence: the pursuit of happiness. It is time, Slaughter declares, to “embrace a national happiness project.”

In what follows, I focus on Slaughter’s essay not merely because it has garnered so much media attention and controversy but, more importantly, because it distinctly registers a profound, if subtle, cultural shift in the conceptions of what constitutes “progress” for (white) middle-class women. Indeed, as I show below, this shift can also be detected in other cultural sites: from Sheryl Sandberg’s best-selling feminist manifesto *Lean In*, through a recent spate of articles in the *New York Times*, to popular television series such as *The Good Wife*. Two aspects of “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” strike me as indicative of this wider cultural trend and worthy of critical attention. The first is the way the essay

5. Ibid., 89.
7. Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” 100.
has sparked a reenvisioning of progressive womanhood as a balancing act and, consequently, has helped to inscribe a new gender norm. Dominant images of progressive—as opposed to conservative or traditional—womanhood in the United States have historically involved a rejection of many of the traits and roles associated with the private sphere. While the image of and society’s relationship to “emancipated” womanhood has always been ambivalent, in the United States “emancipation” has nonetheless been conceived of, especially among upwardly mobile women, as a move away from domesticity. In the 1980s, as more and more middle-class women entered the public sphere, the question of work-family conflict entered the feminist discussion; yet, advocating a felicitous equilibrium as the telos of mainstream liberal feminism marks a decisive change in the discussion. So why, then, is women’s progress and liberation currently being reconceived as the ability to happily balance public and private aspects of the self?

The second striking aspect of “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” is its invocation of happiness as a highly—if not the most highly—valued social good. Slaughter indicates that the pursuit of happiness and, more specifically, women’s own ability to negotiate a satisfying balance between family and work should be a top national and feminist goal. Her essay can therefore be read to participate in what Sara Ahmed has termed the “happiness turn,” and it is this move toward positive affect—as key to overcoming the obstacles currently facing professional women—that requires further unpacking. There is, I argue, a reorienting of the liberal feminist discursive field away from notions of freedom, equal rights, and social justice and toward the importance of well-roundedness and well-being. This, I maintain, can only be achieved through a dramatic contraction in the number of women who are ultimately included in the field’s interpellative address. Yet, while the address may only include a tiny minority of privileged women in the United States, this new ideal of

8. In The Beauty Myth, for example, Naomi Wolf draws on this understanding of emancipation by describing women’s progression from the “feminine mystique of domesticity” to the current state where, she claims, women have more freedom than ever before in history because they have entered the public sphere in increasing numbers. For Wolf, the remaining impediment to women’s enjoyment of their newly found emancipation is what she terms the “beauty myth.” Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth (New York: Morrow and Company, 1991), 10.
progressive womanhood is increasingly being held out as the normative model for all (but particularly aspiring middle-class) women. The question then becomes: what kind of cultural and political work does this change in orientation and discursive emphasis ultimately do?

My point here, it is crucial to stress, is not simply to rehearse the various critiques of Slaughter’s piece that have circulated in the blogosphere or in popular journals — criticism that ranges from the invocation of Carol Gilligan’s notions of “women’s way of working” and essentializing terms such as “maternal instincts,” through the claim that Slaughter is merely repeating a complaint that surfaces every so often about the double shift and work-life balance, to her failure to take into account current cultural pressures on men. While I concur with many of the critiques, my focus is elsewhere. My aim is, first, to map out in some detail the discursive reimagining of progressive womanhood that the essay taps into and reproduces. My second objective is to excavate the specific terms Slaughter mobilizes in an attempt to understand the kind of cultural work — and cultural disavowal — to which the transmutation of liberal feminism into a discourse of positive affect contributes. Finally, I maintain that both of these changes reflect a contemporary crisis in liberalism’s conception and construction of space.

FROM NEW WOMAN THROUGH SUPERWOMAN
TO BALANCED WOMAN: SLAUGHTER’S PROGRESS NARRATIVE

“Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” is clearly informed by the still dominant and relatively uncritical feminist narrative of progress in the United States, which unfolds in the following manner: in the nineteenth century, due to the reigning separate spheres ideology, middle-class women were, on the whole, confined to the domestic realm. By the

end of the nineteenth century, however, and as a result of First Wave feminism’s mobilization, women increasingly demanded recognition as public subjects. Women’s participation in the war effort, the passage of the nineteenth amendment, and the coalescing of the modern New Woman norm were all fruit of this long-standing demand and activism. Freedom, especially for middle-class women who had been associated with the domestic realm, translated into the ability to transcend the private sphere and enter into the public world of political representation and work. Consequently, throughout the twentieth century, upwardly mobile women were often forced to make choices between having a family and pursuing a profession—between traditional definitions of womanhood and “emancipatory” or progressive ones. Until the 1970s, moreover, it was nearly impossible for middle-class women to bridge both spheres at the same time; the choice has historically been framed as an either/or one.


12. This dominant narrative, of course, presents a relatively linear and uncomplicated account of progress. Moreover, the narrative, as many scholars have already underscored, elides all those women who did manage or were forced to bridge both spheres at the same time. Yet, I do think it important to stress the discursive power and continued dominance of this narrative. For example, Pamela Stone and Lisa Ackerly Hernandez underscore the incredible effectiveness of this either/or framework but from a very different perspective. As sociologists, they point out that it has only been since the 1970s that shifting social norms made it possible for increasing numbers of middle- and upper-middle-class women to work fairly continuously throughout their childbearing and childrearing years. Indeed, Stone and Hernandez assert that it is only relatively recently that increasing numbers of women of the educated professional class could begin to envision, anticipate, and “live lives” in which they would simultaneously combine work and family. See Pamela Stone and Lisa Ackerly Hernandez, “The Rhetoric and Reality of ‘Opting Out’: Toward a Better Understanding of Professional Women’s Decisions to Head Home,” in *Women Who Opt Out*, 36.
The progress narrative Slaughter mobilizes in her essay also clearly draws on the well-worn feminist analysis of the traditionally gendered division between the private and the public. This conceptual framework underscores how women have been discursively identified with the private realm while men have identified with — and been identified with — civil society and public life. Slaughter intimates that due to this age-old linkage of womanhood with domesticity and of women’s emancipation over the course of the twentieth century with entry into male-identified public spheres, women had to fight in order to be taken seriously as professionals. They were compelled to demonstrate time and again their commitment to their work over and above any attachment to family: “To admit to, much less act on, maternal longings would have been fatal to their careers.”

US social and business policies as well as dominant social norms, according to Slaughter, still conceive of professional life in these problematically masculinist terms. Professional women have therefore always had to “be a man” in public while, more often than not, disavowing the private realm altogether. Slaughter calls this path the “fetish of the one-dimensional life.” The few women who have traveled down the even more difficult “career-and-family path” — and this has only really become possible in the post-1970s era — have had to enter the professional track on terms created according to a male standard while completely cordoning off their role as women in the private sphere. Not only have these two realms had to be kept strictly separate, but the demands of each have been incredibly high and at total variance.

13. Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” 89. Although I take serious issue with Slaughter’s progress narrative, once again, I do think it important to highlight the effectiveness of this dominant either/or discourse and how it has shaped gender norms as well as the public debates on the possibility of women combining work and family. One has only to think of the so-called mommy wars, which pitted professional women against women who were choosing to stay home with their children, or the “mommy-track debates” — spurred by Felice Schwartz’s 1989 article in the Harvard Business Journal — which brought public attention and scrutiny to the question of whether women with children faced diminishing career opportunities by being “mommy-tracked.” See Felice N. Schwartz, “Management Women and the New Facts of Life,” Women in Management Review 4, no. 5 (1989).

Following once again in the footsteps of feminist political theorists who precede her, Slaughter claims—in precise, widely accessible, and US-specific language—that the public and the private spheres have been (hierarchically) associated with different identities, values, attributes, goods, and demands. This, in turn, makes being successful in both realms at the same time impossible, except for the few women who have superhuman powers or enough money to buy full-time substitutes—nannies and housekeepers, tutors and psychotherapists. Professional women with families—to an exponentially larger degree than professional men with families—have nonetheless been expected to find ways of negotiating the conflicting expectations of both realms while keeping them separate. Living up to these incompatible demands is a Herculean task that very few women can manage. After all, the essay queries, how can you be a present and involved parent and simultaneously demonstrate unwavering commitment to a job that demands long hours and uninterrupted accessibility? Consequently, Slaughter laments, it is not surprising that many initially ambitious women opt out of the fast track in far greater numbers than men and are taking on consulting jobs or part-time work that allows them to spend more time with their children. This trend will only increase, she predicts, unless we transform workplace norms and our understanding of successful career trajectories.

Slaughter proceeds by insisting that, given this disturbing reality, women in positions of power—such as herself—have a moral duty to speak out and declare openly that today many women want both a career and family at the same time; they want to be able to bridge their personal and professional lives without having to prioritize one over the other. This is precisely the moment when the notion of the félicitous balance inserts itself as the essay’s solution to a long-standing problem. While confinement to the domestic sphere was certainly oppressive for many middle-class women, the subsequent normative demand that “emancipated” women who have professional aspirations privilege the public over the private has also been debilitating. This is particularly true because in the career world, family has been devalued, disavowed, or aligned with regressive tradition. In other words, among liberals—which

is the demographic Slaughter is self-consciously addressing and a demographic that, as I show below, is also very clearly class and racially specific—there has been a privileging of the public over the private, which, according to the essay’s logic, has had divisive effects on society as a whole, but especially on women who have wanted to combine both career ambitions and motherhood. The solution, then, is to find ways of bringing both worlds into happy equilibrium.

This revision of progressive or liberated womanhood that marks Slaughter’s essay thus critiques the superwoman model (in which women are expected to live up to the expectations of both realms while keeping them separate and unchanged) while attempting to integrate some version of nineteenth-century True Womanhood with some version of the twentieth-century New Woman.16 The hybrid progressive professional woman Slaughter engenders exhibits both a natural maternal “imperative” and serious career ambitions. By transforming the way the workplace operates so that women can be “present mothers” even as they continue working, and by thinking differently about normative career trajectories (no longer linear but wave-like), we can, according to the essay’s reasoning, help facilitate the birth of the new ideal: the well-rounded woman. Slaughter maintains that it is possible to reconcile notions of womanhood that were once seemingly irreconcilable by changing our cultural orientations, particularly by transforming the public sphere so that it can accommodate the pulls, demands, and desires of the private realm.17

Precisely because the post-1970s era opened up unprecedented opportunities and freedoms for women, Slaughter tells us, a different kind of conversation has now become possible. In other words, the cultural climate is finally ripe for insisting that progressive professional women can in fact bridge private and public spheres simultaneously without


17. Nitza Berkovitch has pointed out that Slaughter’s transformation of the public sphere is shockingly minimal. “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” discusses flextime and face time but in no way challenges the norm of the ten- to twelve-hour work day. Nor does it demand one of the staples of 1970s feminism: state-provided childcare. Nitza Berkovitch, personal correspondence with author, December 22–24, 2012.
disavowing or disparaging either one. This becomes the true moment of
liberation for Slaughter — where neither realm needs to be valued more
highly than the other. From True Womanhood through New Woman and
Superwoman, it has finally become possible to speak about the Balanced
Woman. This, I posit, is how the “truly liberated” woman of the twenty-
first century is increasingly being construed. This newest version of pro-
gressive womanhood, moreover, has not only permeated the popular
imagination but has also begun to exert a destructive force.

BEYOND SLAUGHTER:

Balance as “Progressive” in US Popular Culture

Unlike Second Wave feminists who famously insisted that the personal is
political, and thus reconfigured the private as part of the public, Slaugh-
ter advocates reshaping the public in light of the demands and needs of
the private: the public sphere must be reconstituted so that society can
begin recognizing the value of childrearing and family life. Slaughter is
clearly neither the first feminist to advocate a change in the public sphere
nor to challenge the hierarchy of values associated with the public and
private spheres.18 However, her call to change workplace norms while
continuing to encourage women to pursue meaningful careers, the notice-
able — and disturbing — absence of a critique of “maternal instincts” in
her vision, and her repeated insistence on the paramount importance of
pursuing happiness are all, I claim, indicative of a wider discursive shift
in the way “progress” for women is being construed in US culture more
broadly.19

Indeed, Facebook’s chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg’s femi-
nist manifesto Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead appeared not
long after the publication of Slaughter’s article. It is ironic that the media
has insisted on pitting Slaughter and Sandberg against one another, since,
despite their different emphases, both women’s fundamental assump-
tions that achieving a balance constitutes liberation and progress for

18. See, for example, Wendy Brown, States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late
Modernity (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); Carole Pate-
man, The Sexual Contract (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988);
and Elshtain, Public Man, Private Woman.
19. See also Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” Cultural
Studies, published online Nov. 18, 2013, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/
abs/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361#.Ut17Uyg8Iy5.
women are virtually indistinguishable. Sandberg focuses on changing women’s attitudes about work and self, exhorting them to “lean in” to their careers. Slaughter focuses on legitimating women’s “natural” commitment toward families, while urging social institutions to make room for these attitudes. In both cases there is a deeply held conviction that if high-potential women undertake the task of revaluing their ambition (Sandberg) or the normative expectation that work comes first (Slaughter), then all women will be empowered and will be able to carve out their own felicitous work-family balance. *Lean In*, too, presents women who are “competent professionals and happy mothers—or... happy professionals and competent mothers” as its progressive and feminist ideal.20

The balance theme is also appearing with increasing frequency in other mainstream venues and popular television series. In a July 12, 2013, *New York Times* article, for example, Kate Taylor describes a rising phenomenon among middle-class undergraduate women in elite universities. Holding up women such as Sandberg and Slaughter as their role models, Taylor describes how potentially high-achieving young women are no longer interested in investing in relationships during their college years—years when they feel they need to be concerned with building their professional résumés. Yet, like Sandberg, these women do not in any way reject the family part of the equation. Rather, the women interviewed by Taylor declared that they would likely defer marriage until their late twenties or early thirties when they thought they would have already established themselves professionally. In other words, this careful calculation of cost-benefit in the present will make it possible to craft that elusive, happy work-family balance later on.21

Seemingly on the other extreme, Judith Warner’s *New York Times* article of August 7, 2013, titled “The Opt-Out Generation Wants Back In,” describes how women who, ten years before, chose to leave the rat race in order to raise their children are now “opting back in” to the world of work. In other words, these highly educated women, who gave up promising careers in the late 1990s are now attempting to reenter the workforce but in less lucrative, less pressured, and more flexible positions. Warner

underscores that the regret these women most often felt after a decade at home was not so much leaving the professional rat race but rather having failed to find “some sort of intellectually stimulating, respectably paying, advancement-permitting part-time work” that would have allowed them to spend time with their children while they were young. These articles—in many ways mirroring the different emphases of Sandberg and Slaughter—ultimately reinforce the same message: the difficulty but desirability of upwardly mobile women crafting a felicitous equilibrium between work and family. Balancing private and public aspects of the self thus becomes the telos of the progressive narrative with respect to emancipated womanhood.

This shift, I suggest, can also be seen in popular television series as more comic characters, such as Ally McBeal and Sex in the City’s Carrie Bradshaw—both professionally successful but on the constant lookout for a meaningful heterosexual relationship—are (slowly) being replaced by dramatic female leads such as The Good Wife’s Alicia Florrick and Birgitte Nyberg from the Danish series Borgen, which is slated to be remade for US audiences. In The Good Wife, Alicia Florrick is portrayed as having opted out of the legal fast track to raise her children while her husband pursued a career in public office. The first season opens thirteen years later, after Alicia has returned to the law and after having been estranged from her husband who has had a salacious and widely publicized affair. Despite the fact that her children are now teenagers, in the first few seasons Alicia finds negotiating work and family difficult. This manifests itself in Alicia’s articulations of guilt for coming home late (thus having to rely on her mother-in-law whom she does not trust) and eventually in her decision to terminate an affair with her boss when she loses track of her daughter’s whereabouts while rendezvousing with her lover. Putting work or her “guilty” pleasure before family causes her psychic malaise.

23. Borgen’s first two seasons depict Birgitte Nyberg’s tenure as the newly elected prime minister of Denmark. Not surprisingly, Brigitte has great difficulty maintaining intimacy with her husband and children as she faces the incredible pressures of leading a country.
The protagonists of both *The Good Wife* and *Borgen* are serious and career-oriented women, and while the importance of heterosexual love is transmuted into family (thus positioning this aspect of women's life firmly in the private sphere), their search is less about sexual satisfaction and coupling and more about equilibrium. Indeed, the characters of Ally McBeal and Carrie Bradshaw seem to embody an earlier ambivalence with respect to women's freedom and presence in the public sphere. Both are portrayed as liberated professionally and sexually, yet they still long for love; they are liberated but unfulfilled (since to be normatively fulfilled as women requires heterosexual coupling). By contrast, Alicia Florrick and Birgitte Nyberg are more concerned about well-being, and their primary concerns revolve around whether they will be able to negotiate the two spheres of their lives successfully. Heterosexual coupling (although, interestingly, not necessarily long term and mostly for the children this coupling engenders) and career aspirations are givens; they are the background on which the quest for well-roundedness gets played out. Thus, the dilemma and the ambivalence no longer seem to be about entering the public sphere, or about finding the right partner, but rather about the possibility of finding happiness through a balancing act, which itself becomes the sign of women's progress.

The buzz and controversy that Slaughter’s “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” generated clearly indicates that the essay tapped into a cultural sore spot, one that has been festering for the last few decades. And yet, precisely because Slaughter is an exceedingly successful professional woman, one who continues to advocate the importance of women’s career aspirations and who is a self-identified feminist, her mobilization of terms such as “balance” and “happiness” helped to imbue them with a progressive and feminist valence. These terms, of course, also resonate deeply and dovetail with still other discourses and other cultural sites—such as the recent spate of academic books that challenge the notion that women are “opting out” (at the same time underscoring the structural obstacles that inhibit middle-class women’s advancement); advice pamphlets on how to balance work and family, now widely available on university websites; and self-help books dedicated to the pursuit of happiness—all of which are associated with society’s as well as the

individual’s “improvement.” As Slaughter reported in a talk she gave at Princeton six months after her essay appeared, many women read her essay as final permission to start working part-time while their children are small—and to reframe this decision as part of the legacy of feminism. While clearly endorsing these decisions, Slaughter was also adamant about encouraging these women not to abandon their career aspirations, since the pursuit of happiness includes a well-rounded life. The elusive ideal of a “happy” balance can therefore be seen to collate the New York Times articles, Sandberg’s Lean In, popular television series, and Slaughter’s piece in a complex cultural web.

FROM SOCIAL JUSTICE TO HAPPINESS

Slaughter is obviously motivated by a desire to understand why so few well-positioned and privileged women “have it all” and why even fewer of these women have it all “happily.” Moreover, she uses her personal story as a way of underscoring that unhappiness among these women is precisely not a personal but a larger social problem. Slaughter’s focus is on US society’s failure to value parenting and to recognize the legitimacy of professional women’s desire to be present mothers. Feminist discussions about work-family balance, such as Arlie Hochschild’s 1989 classic The Double Shift, as well as her 1997 Time Bind and more recent works such as the 2011 anthology At the Heart of Work and Family, have underscored women’s often difficult negotiation between work and home life, particularly given the deeply entrenched assumption that women are still ultimately responsible for domestic duties. For working mothers,


27. See Ehrenreich, Garey, and Hansen, At the Heart of Work and Family; Hochschild and Machung, The Second Shift; and Arlie Russell Hochschild, The
navigating the constantly shifting demands of career and family has always been necessary in order to survive; conflict is stressed while balance is presented as the implicitly desirable yet never the end goal of feminism. Slaughter draws on this older debate but then reworks it through a discourse of positive affect, while ultimately holding up “a happy balance” as the objective for liberal feminists. Crafting a felicitous balance — charting a path between norms of “intensive mothering” and professional success — has become normative, the new ideal of progressive middle-class womanhood. If in the past, progress was measured by these women’s entrance into professions, today well-roundedness and well-being increasingly signify liberation. Slaughter’s own surprise at the fact that she wanted to go home after her two-year stint in Washington is, in many ways, the fulcrum on which the essay rests. These different orientations and emphases are, I argue, crucial for understanding the cultural shift that we are currently witnessing, a shift that involves the mobilization of affective terms.

As a way of demonstrating that the current crisis is not the consequence of individual women’s dysfunction, Slaughter quotes the economists Justin Wolfers and Betsey Stevenson who have “shown that women are less happy today than their predecessors were in 1972, both in absolute terms and relative to men.” Given the claims Slaughter makes in her essay, the reader is plainly meant to conclude that women are unhappier today because social conditions have obstructed their ability to negotiate a “truly” balanced life. Slaughter insists that in today’s cultural climate, it is virtually impossible to be both an involved parent and successful professional, which is why so many “high potential” women suffer great anxiety and unhappiness. But Slaughter is also an optimist, and the happiness project that she endorses is one in which the highest (feminist) good is the successful integration of the two most important realms that make up women’s lives. It is only when we begin to value “the

28. See, for example, Hochschild and Machung, The Second Shift.
29. Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” 89.
30. Ibid., 10.
people [women] love as much as the success they seek” that we will begin to help “Americans have healthy, happy, productive lives.”

The embrace of a national happiness project, which “start[s] at home” and which endorses a family-comes-first principle is a striking stance and not simply because it is likely to be read as reactionary by many contemporary feminists. Rather, what is particularly odd is exactly how little emphasis Slaughter ultimately places on equal rights, justice, or emancipation as the end goals for the feminism with which she clearly identifies. Another strange inconsistency is her acknowledgment that the crisis she explores is one that is most relevant for “high potential” upwardly mobile women, on the one hand, and her call for a national happiness project on the other. The move from equal rights and social justice to national happiness is, I maintain, predicated on the erasure or exclusion of the vast majority of women. Put differently, the happiness project Slaughter advocates is neither nationally nor universally relevant, since it does not and cannot take into account the reality of most US women. After all, statistics show that in 2009, 27.5 percent of African American women, 27.4 percent of Hispanic women, and 13.5 percent of white women were living below the poverty line. Moreover, 35.1 percent of households headed by single moms were food insecure at some point in 2010, meaning that they didn’t have enough food at all times for an active, healthy life. Many working mothers are working double shifts, night shifts, or two to three jobs just in order to provide for their families. Thus, given these blatant class and race biases, there is something profoundly illiberal — and fundamentally incongruous — in Slaughter’s reenvisioning of progressive womanhood as a balancing act and in her call for the pursuit of happiness. Yet, once these inconsistencies and

31. Ibid., 102.
32. Ibid., 100.
33. The term “equal opportunity” appears in the byline of the article (it is not clear whether Slaughter wrote this byline or whether it was the editor at the Atlantic), but then is barely mentioned again.
35. Although the implications of this call for the pursuit of happiness on those excluded from its address are clearly profound, exactly what the repercussions will be remains to be seen. As a normalizing matrix, the ideal of a
elisions are examined more closely, the question then becomes: how and why does happiness come to insert itself as a key term in Slaughter’s progress narrative?

The “woman problem” in the United States no longer appears to be about equity (between women and men or among women themselves), women’s right to autonomy, or rethinking how we understand emancipation, but rather it is about affect, behavior modification, and well-roundedness. Consequently, it is not surprising that the best-selling Lean In, too, focuses on changing women’s attitudes about work and self. Sandberg and Slaughter, it is important to note, are fast becoming the most visible representatives of feminism in the United States in the early twenty-first century. For Slaughter, once we undertake the task of revaluing the private (ironically, by changing only the public), then supposedly all women will be empowered to make better choices; for Sandberg, transforming women’s attitudes toward their careers becomes the necessary condition for ensuring women’s liberation and happiness as well as changing society. According to both Slaughter and Sandberg’s logic, transforming affect and orientation become the necessary conditions for ensuring women’s ability to choose better — choice being, of course, a benchmark of and code word for liberal freedom. This is one of the reasons that Slaughter’s article sparked the “renewed” feminist debate and has received so much attention: it does not merely point to or reiterate the long-standing work-family problem — although it does this as well and universalizes the problem in disturbing ways — but it provides seemingly simple solutions that invoke recognizable liberal, feminist-inflected, and US-specific terms.

Slaughter’s invocation of Gretchen Rubin’s The Happiness Project indicates that “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” is indeed wittily tapping into the current “happiness turn,” which, in the United States, has found expression in a wide range of fields and disciplines. Not only has a professional journal, The Journal of Happiness Studies
(dedicated to “the scientific understanding of subjective well-being”37),
been established, but in the last few years popular and academic.writ-
ings, from philosophy to economics, have been engaging the question as
well as asserting the importance of happiness. It has now become com-
monplace to refer to “the happiness industry.”38 Slaughter can therefore
be seen to have contributed to this industry by weaving the desirabil-
ity of pursuing a happy work-family balance into the feminist discurs-
ive fabric. And this is one way in which her essay becomes symptomatic
of a larger cultural phenomenon. Something besides Slaughter’s own
class, race, and heteronormative bias is being dramatized in her essay,
and this something revolves around a subtle but shifting discursive reg-
ister. More specifically, I suggest that Slaughter’s piece participates in —
as well as registers — a certain transmutation of liberal feminism into a
discourse of positive affect.

WHAT DOES HAPPINESS DO?
In her book The Promise of Happiness, Sara Ahmed asks not what hap-
piness is but rather what happiness does. She argues that happiness as
a social good has a long history and can be traced back to the classical
notion of eudaimonia, which translates roughly into the living of a good,
meaningful, and virtuous life, expounded by Aristotle in Ethics. The path
to eudaimonia, Ahmed reminds us, is inextricable from what a par-
ticular society deems a life worth living. Happiness thus functions as
a promise that directs communities toward certain objects, goals, and
behaviors, which are considered necessary ingredients for a good life.
The demand for happiness in contemporary society, Ahmed posits, is
“increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals.” This is
true because happiness operates as a form of world making; happiness
makes the world cohere around certain “good” ways of living.39 In times
of crisis, therefore, it is precisely those ways of living and accepted social
forms that are challenged. If we are indeed witnessing a “happiness turn”
today, as Ahmed contends and the “happiness industry” suggests, then

39. Ibid., 7, 14–15.
the corollary is surely that this turn serves as a defense against profound challenges to our social ideals.

Read through Ahmed’s theoretical framework, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” is transformed into a happiness script that provides directions for what women in general should do and need to do in order to follow the path to happiness. Slaughter herself is aware of the prescriptive aspect of her essay and self-consciously asserts that there are certain concrete steps that need to be taken in order to allow women to craft their own felicitous work-family balance. But this is precisely where things begin to get sticky since, according to Ahmed, “happiness involves a form of orientation; the hope for happiness means [subjects] get directed in specific ways, as happiness is assumed to follow from some life choices and not others.”

The promise of happiness that Slaughter, Sandberg, and certain newspaper articles and popular television series offers, of course, does look very much like a social ideal. After all, the entire notion of a felicitous work-family balance, in effect (and not surprisingly), reinscribes the desirability of having both a profession or meaningful career and a normative family. The promise of happiness, in other words, hinges not only on one’s ability but also on one’s active desire to cultivate a profession or meaningful work and on having not just a spouse but—more importantly for the twenty-first century, it seems—children. Moreover, the message Slaughter’s essay reinforces is that happiness can only (or, reading more generously, is most likely to) be found by following a particular path. The essay is therefore not advocating a kind of libertarian “choice feminism,” since there is an underlying assumption that only certain choices can bring women in closer proximity to eudaimonia.

Angela McRobbie has already argued in a different context that the whole notion of work-family balance “tends to reinstate hierarchical gender norms in the heterosexual household.” In addition, Ahmed highlights how difficult it has been to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, whiteness, and the middle class. It is not surprising, then, that the representations of women struggling to find eudaimonia through work-family balance

40. Ibid., 54.
42. Ahmed, The Promise of Happiness, 112.
are white, upper middle class, and heterosexual. While Slaughter has responded to the critique of her class bias by stating publicly that she is aware that she is addressing a very particular demographic, her notion of a happy work-family balance, wittingly or not, plays into the dominant cultural logic by interpellating a much broader constituency of women by mobilizing the highly general language of “happiness.”

The notion of pursuing happiness through finding the right work-family balance thus becomes a normalizing matrix and a form of governmentality that interpellates all aspiring middle-class women and helps shape and direct women’s aspirations, desires, and behavior.43 Women, in other words, are compelled and encouraged to want to “have it all.” Part of the cultural work that the promise of happiness does is to orient (all) subjects in the “right way,” namely, in the direction of the social ideals that are thought to bring happiness through a subject’s proximity to them. The promise operates as a technology of cultivation and control through affective routes: “A happy life, a good life, hence, involves the regulation of desire. It is not simply that we desire happiness but that happiness is imagined as what you get in return for desiring well.” 44 For Alicia Florrick, the “good wife” in the series of the same name, her decision to give up her affair, which has caused her to deviate somewhat from the happiness script since it “endangered” her family, can be understood as part of this normative injunction. Happiness, after all, is a sign of the “good,” of the virtuous subject, and of the good life. And, who, after all, does not want to be happy?

Some of Slaughter’s critics have pointed out that her prescriptions can be used to ensure, once again, that women do not advance as quickly as men. Her essay, in other words, can be read to reinforce the assumption that most women, once they have children, will simply not want or be able to compete with their male counterparts.45 It does not seem coincidental that the notion of a happy work-family balance comes at a

43. The address extends beyond heterosexual, middle-class women, increasingly incorporating all aspiring middle-class women, whether they are straight or not. Thus heterosexual coupling can, as it were, simply be replaced by homonormative coupling, while the rest of the happiness script remains the same.
45. See Rebecca Traister, “Can Modern Women Have It All?” http://www.salon.com/2012/06/21/can_modern_women_have_it_all.
historical juncture in which women are quickly outpacing men in terms of education and in which statistics indicate that, in the United States, women constitute over 59 percent of the college-educated, entry-level workforce. Professional-minded women are often earning more than the men in their lives, and 38 percent of wives out-earn their husbands in US households. Consequently, holding out the promise of happiness to those women who attempt to emulate the ideal of the Balanced Woman can be read as yet another kind of backlash against feminist and women's gains, the latest myth that will ultimately ensure that upwardly mobile women do not progress as quickly or as far as men. In this critique, the Balanced Woman ideal, where women are encouraged to be hands-on mothers as well as professionals, becomes the latest—if unwitting—inarnation of a longer genealogy of ideals, such as the Feminine Mystique and the Beauty Myth, whose ultimate purposes are to keep women down. The Balanced Woman, after all, includes the injunction that women keep one foot firmly planted in the private sphere.

The kind of normalizing cultural work that the call for the pursuit of happiness ultimately produces may be clear, yet accounting for the complex cultural logic behind the call is, I believe, much more difficult. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that by morphing the “woman problem” into a happiness project, Slaughter’s essay lays bare, even as it endeavors to cover over, the fault lines of the liberal production of space — namely, the public/private divide.

SAVING THE LIBERAL IMAGINATION
The notion of a happy work-family balance can, I posit, be read as an attempt to shore up the presumptions of liberalism’s conception and construction of space. Articulated at a time when Western liberal democracies are loudly decrying women’s lack of freedom in the Muslim world while lionizing gender equality in their own societies, it makes cultural sense to shift the conversation away from the gendered division

47. See Lindy West, “No One ‘Has It All,’ Because ‘Having It All’ Doesn’t Exist,” Jezebel (blog), June 22, 2012, http://jezebel.com/5920625/no-one-has-it-all-because-having-it-all-doesnt-exist; and Traister, “Can Modern Women ‘Have It All?’”
of labor on which US liberalism itself is constituted. I am tempted to go so far as to say that the turn to “balance” and “happiness” underscores that we have reached the limits of liberalism’s construal of emancipation and that this limit is articulated or being played out, not surprisingly, through a crisis concerning the very privileged women who are supposed to benefit most from the West’s gender equality and freedom.

Wendy Brown’s early insights into the gendered operations of liberalism are still relevant for providing an alternative explanation of why we are witnessing a turn to a “happy work-life balance” as the liberal feminist solution to what has been deemed a deepening affective crisis among ambitious professional women with families. After all, if upper middle-class white women are in trouble, as Slaughter’s piece suggests, then what might that tell us, as a society, about the limitations of liberalism’s “emancipatory” promise with respect to women more generally?

Brown has argued that while the public domain in the liberal imaginary is the realm in which rights are exercised and individuality is expressed, the private sphere of family is the domain governed by needs and affective ties. Liberal democracies have been constituted through and structured around this bifurcation, a bifurcation that itself is produced through the presupposition that men circulate in civil society while women are stationed in the family. Brown further argues that liberalism’s formulation of liberty is dependent upon and enforces a gendered division of labor in which women are construed as immanent while men are construed as free or unencumbered. In other words, the public sphere of autonomous, independent, freely choosing liberal subjects actually requires the production of its other—the domain of encumbrance and relationality—for its very sustenance, maintenance, and intelligibility. Given the way in which the discursive identification of “womanhood” with the private, familiar, and reproductive domain is inextricable from liberalism’s very production and construal of space, women can never quite be “possessive individuals,” nor can they inhabit public space in the way that men do.48

Thus, if liberalism is constituted through a spatialized gender division and interpellative identification, no woman who aspires to emulate

the unencumbered individual can ever completely succeed: for subjects
interpellated into society as women, there will always be a remainder,
a constitutive “primary” failure, given the discursive identification of
womanhood with domesticity, family, and the private realm.49 Thus,
emancipated womanhood is, in some very basic way, a contradiction in
terms, since the very definition of womanhood in liberal discourse is
(ultimately) inextricable from encumbrance and need, while emancipa-
tion in Western liberal democracies, as Joan Scott has pointed out in
a slightly different context, has been understood as getting “out from
under, to be able to press ahead with no obstacles in one’s path, to enjoy
some measure of unencumbered thought or movement, from a situ-
tion of constraint to one of some kind of freedom.”50 In Western liberal
democracies in general and in the United States more specifically, wom-
en’s very identity as women always already includes within it a discursive
link to the realm of encumbrance. Emancipation as an ideal, by contrast,
and as Scott further argues, has been defined as being either throwing
off the shackles of encumbrance or “self-determination of a freely choos-
ing, autonomous person.”51 As a consequence, within the liberal imagi-
nary itself, women can never really be fully or entirely emancipated. And,
when the question of children enters into the equation, this constitutive
remainder or failure rears its head more forcibly and becomes increas-
ingly unwieldy.

Both Brown’s and Scott’s theoretical insights help explain why
women still can’t “have it all,” but they do so from a very different perspec-
tive from the one Slaughter offers. Brown’s feminist critique of liberalism
can also help explain why professional women with families have been
required to undergo a “splitting” of identifications — being “men” in the
public sphere while cordonning off their roles as women in the private
sphere. As Slaughter’s essay indicates, it takes superhuman capabilities
to successfully carry out the normative obligations of “womanhood”—
of catering to the needs and the affective demands of the household,

49. Of course, men can never emulate once and for all the “unencumbered” sub-
ject either, but that performatve failure is likely to manifest itself in a dif-
ferent modality, one less tainted by encumbrance.
50. Joan Wallach Scott, “The Vexed Relationship of Emancipation and Equal-
ity,” History of the Present 2, no. 2 (2012): 149.
51. Ibid., 153.
particularly at a time when “intensive mothering” has become the middle-class standard—while simultaneously performing the role of the unencumbered individual in the public sphere. Slaughter’s description of this split identification is insightful. Yet, as a liberal feminist, Slaughter’s answer to this problem entails an attempt to heal that split by remobilizing and revaluing the very same terms. The call to reinvigorate the pursuit of happiness through negotiating a balance between the public and the private thus becomes symptomatic of a profound disavowal, since it attempts to do the impossible—suture a gendered split that is constitutive of the very way space is established and organized in the liberal imaginary.

The invention of the ideal of the happy work-family balance can therefore be read as yet another attempt to reshuffle familiar cards without bringing the entire house down. Represented as having chosen to bridge the private and the public, the liberated woman of the twenty-first century is simultaneously a public subject and a (present) mother. She awkwardly attempts to reconcile the autonomous liberal subject with its constitutive other, encumbered immanence. Indeed, at a moment when prominent scholars such as Scott are honing in on the gendered antinomies of liberal notions of emancipation as well as underscoring the evacuation of liberal political principles by a colonizing neoliberal rationality, the widespread mobilization and acceptance of terms such as “happy work-family balance” help divert attention away from self-scrutiny in the United States and shore up the gendered presuppositions that make the liberal production of space possible. Not only does the burden of unhappiness and disequilibrium ultimately get placed, once again, on the shoulders of individual women, which further entrenches neoliberalism, but the task of pursuing happiness orients us away from attempting to imagine spatiality and social relations in new ways. Indeed, it has become nearly impossible to contemplate alternative ways of organizing space or conceptualizing emancipation that do not involve the public/


private opposition in some form. Yet this is precisely the kind of political and cultural work that we need to do if we want to try to open up currently unimaginable egalitarian spaces, possibilities, and social relations for the future.

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