Neoliberal Feminism and the Future of Human Capital

When Emma Watson, the newly selected UN Women Goodwill Ambassador best known for her role as Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter movies, declared herself a feminist in front of a crowd at the headquarters of the United Nations in September 2014, she received not only hearty applause from those present but also accolades from the mainstream and popular press. Indeed, the twenty-something Watson announced to an auditorium full of powerful international players that she proudly considered herself a feminist and that “this seemed uncomplicated to [her]” even as she understood that feminism had become an unpopular word.¹ The YouTube clip of the nervous but still poised Watson immediately went viral and has since attracted over 7 million viewers. In the wake of Watson’s speech, it thus seems safe to say that we are currently witnessing a historic moment in which it has finally become acceptable for highly visible Western women to identify publicly as feminists.

Watson’s speech also suggests that critics may have been too hasty in determining that we have moved, ineluctably, into a postfeminist society. The term postfeminist is most often invoked critically in scholarly literature to refer to a discursive formation and sensibility in the West—particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom—that incorporates various aspects of feminism while simultaneously disavowing the necessity of mobilizing a feminist movement to struggle for gender justice (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). More specifically, postfeminism is understood to focus on the importance of individual women’s empowerment and choice, presenting feminism as something that has already occurred, accomplished its goals, and is therefore passé or no longer necessary. Rather than simply being anti-feminist, however, the postfeminist era appears to constitute a complex “entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (Gill 2007, 161).

Watson’s very public declaration that she identifies as a feminist and the overwhelmingly positive reception she received, however, problematizes the

¹ Video of Emma Watson’s HeForShe speech before the UN is available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p-iFl4qhBxE.
claim that we are currently living in a postfeminist era. This problematization gains added force if we situate Watson’s declaration within a wider cultural context—specifically the United States—where feminism has resurfaced as an important and even influential discourse. Within the span of just a few years, a flurry of self-declared feminist manifestos have circulated widely, garnering intense mainstream media attention and reenergizing feminist debates, most trenchantly around the question of why middle-class women are still struggling to cultivate careers and raise children at the same time. Two of these, Anne-Marie Slaughter’s “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” published in the Atlantic in the summer of 2012, and Sheryl Sandberg’s best-selling Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead, published just a few months later in 2013, might well be said to have initiated this trend of high-power women publicly and unabashedly identifying as feminists (Slaughter 2012; Sandberg 2013). Taken together, these recent developments underscore that we have moved from an arguably postfeminist moment (back) to a feminist one—a moment in which feminism not only still seems necessary but also increasingly mainstream.

Watson’s short but passionate speech for the HeForShe campaign concentrated on urging boys and men to participate in the fight against gender inequality, asking them to ban the use of the word “bossy” to refer to strong and confident girls. Slaughter’s and Sandberg’s feminist solutions are somewhat different and revolve around a felicitous balance, namely, ensuring women’s ability to pursue a fulfilling career without having to forgo family life or raising children (Rottenberg 2014a). To be sure, these are “accommodating feminism[s],” which shy away from argument and confrontation (McRobbie 2013, 135). Consequently—and not surprisingly—these public feminist declarations have been harshly criticized by postcolonial feminists. Sandberg’s and Slaughter’s manifestos have also been criticized for advocating a “trickle-down” corporate feminism (Eisenstein 2013; see also Huffer 2013). Yet the fact remains that feminism, however ill-defined or watered down, is currently experiencing a wave of unprecedented

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2 In a recent article, Angela McRobbie (2015) also reflects on feminism’s rehabilitation, thus revisiting her earlier claims about postfeminism.


4 Writing for Al Jazeera, Julia Zulver (2014), for instance, criticizes the United Nations’ decision to elect “a white, Western, heterosexual, upper-class woman” who then was asked to speak “for a group of united nations,” underscoring that Watson’s speech invoked an “over-simplified, outdated version of gender discourse.”
popularity in the United States. Jessica Valenti, the journalist and well-known feminist blogger, confirms that more young women are thinking about, looking into, and calling themselves feminists than in the past two decades (Valenti 2014). Feminism has, in other words, been given a new life.

In what follows, I more closely interrogate feminism’s new life as it has been circulating in mainstream US print media, while I examine some of the central terms, concepts, and ideals around which this new feminist discourse is coalescing. Drawing on the insights of cultural and media theorists such as Rosalind Gill (2007) and Angela McRobbie (2013, 2015), I assume that these widely circulated and popular venues register and (re)produce particular cultural sensibilities. Even though the claims in these mainstream articles may at times be based on dubious research, the articles nonetheless have cultural currency. Scholars have accordingly noted that the rhetoric mobilized by both Slaughter and Sandberg has not only helped to reinvigorate an older work-family debate in the United States but has also helped to inscribe balance as a feminist ideal and therefore as one of the highest feminist priorities. On the one hand, the balance discourse encourages women to invest in and cultivate a career as well as to develop one’s sense of self, which has long been a liberal feminist objective. Yet, on the other hand, the balance discourse reinscribes the normative expectation that women should have—and should want to have—children (Rotenberg 2014a). The second part of the balance equation, the expectation of (hands-on or intensive) mothering, has also become part and parcel of feminist discourse, at least as it has infiltrated mainstream consciousness at the present moment. In addition, the newest form of feminism, such as is found in the writing of Sandberg and Slaughter, activates a more attentive, luminous, and exclusive address to upwardly mobile, aspirational women (McRobbie 2013). This feminism is an “unapologetically middle-class feminism, shorn of all obligations to less privileged women or to those who are not ‘strivers’” (McRobbie 2013, 120).

Examining this contemporary upsurge in feminist declarations and the ostensible (mainstream) embrace of feminism, I lay out three interrelated claims here. First, I reinforce the claim that a new feminism is on the rise, one that indeed presents balance as its normative frame and ultimate ideal. Scholars have already outlined in detail the processes by which mainstream liberal feminism is converging with neoliberalism (Fraser 2013; Orloff and Schiff 2014; Prügl 2015) and have argued that this convergence is in turn producing an individuated feminist subject whose identity is informed by a cost-benefit calculus (Rotenberg 2014b). However, I claim that this neoliberal feminist discourse is also producing a new form of neoliberal governmentality for middle-class women, one that is not based on the man-
agement of future risks (e.g., Beck 1992) but rather on the promise of future individual fulfillment or, more accurately, on careful sequencing of career and maternity and smart (self-)investments in the present to ensure enhanced returns in the future. In other words, we are currently witnessing a temporal shift with respect to the discourse of balance. Upwardly mobile middle-class women are increasingly being encouraged to invest in themselves and their professions first and to postpone maternity until some later point.

I provide two representative examples of this phenomenon—the glorification of hookup culture among young high-potential women on college campuses and the new availability of egg freezing as part of the benefits package of corporations such as Facebook—in order to demonstrate this striking temporal shift in the balance discourse. If Sandberg and Slaughter insisted that balance was possible in the present, in just the past few years there has been a subtle but crucial transformation in the way balance is being presented in the mainstream media: from an undertaking to be realized in the present to a promise for the future. I propose that, by revealing the temporal shift in the work-family balance discourse, we can gain insight into how neoliberal rationality operates through a new “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988) structured through futurity.

Second, I suggest that this future-oriented promise of equilibrium may well constitute part of a conversion process the aim of which is to transform women into neoliberal human capital, a process that is ongoing but as yet incomplete. If it is true that neoliberalism is slowly colonizing every aspect of our world (Harvey 2005), then human subjects, too, are being remade into what Wendy Brown cogently describes as human capital, namely, beings “whose objective is to self-invest in ways that enhance its figurative credit rating and attract investors” (2015, 33). Encouraging upwardly mobile women to build their own portfolios and to self-invest during the years once thought of as the most fertile suggests that neoliberalism is increasingly interpellating women—particularly middle-class women—as human capital. On the other hand, I posit that reproduction continues to present a stumbling block in this conversion process, especially since reproduction and the care work it entails are thoroughly disavowed in neoliberal rationality. As this rationality increasingly converts certain women into human capital, however, the link between these women and reproduction and care work is slowly being attenuated. In other words, reproduction and care work are already being outsourced to other women deemed disposable since they are neither considered strivers nor properly responsibilized. The emergent neoliberal order is slowly expunging gender and even sexual differences among a certain strata of subjects while it simultaneously produces new forms of racialized and class-stratified gender exploitation.
Finally, I also explain why the operation of futurity becomes particularly discernable in neoliberal feminism; I maintain that this feminism currently facilitates the advancement of the neoliberal project while it concomitantly reveals a constituent disjuncture within neoliberal rationality. This disjuncture seems to revolve precisely around the still-incomplete conversion of middle-class women into human capital due to the quandary reproduction continues to present, particularly as the sexual division of labor is not disappearing but is rather being (re)naturalized in various and complex ways.

The balanced feminist

While the notion of work-family balance in the United States can be traced back to the early 1980s—gaining feminist currency with the publication of Arlie Hochschild’s bestselling *The Second Shift* ([1989] 2003)—the feminist debate about the difficulty of work-family balance has clearly been re-ignited by Slaughter’s “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” and Sandberg’s *Lean In*. The first was written by a former State Department director of policy planning and Princeton professor and the second by the chief operating officer at Facebook. These two feminist manifestos have been read in astonishingly large numbers, generating much discussion and media attention. They have also reopened the debate about how, why, and in what ways the feminist revolution has stalled (see, e.g., Coontz 2013).

While the emphases of these two texts may be different—and they have repeatedly been represented in the media as representing opposing camps—their feminist ideal ultimately remains the same: enabling women to establish a successful career and a (hetero)normative family while also ensuring that they can enjoy both at the same time. The means may vary, but in both cases there is a deeply held conviction that once high-potential women undertake the task of revaluing and pursuing their ambition (Sandberg) or rethinking the normative expectation that work comes first (Slaughter), then all women will be empowered and will be able to carve out their own happy work-family balance in the present. As critics have been quick to point out, balancing a high-power career and family is attainable for (perhaps) the top 1 percent (see Eisenstein 2013; Huffer 2013; Rottenberg 2013). Yet once balance is held out as a promise for the future, then this norm is transformed into an ostensibly achievable objective for all middle-class women. Indeed, increasingly this ideal of balance serves as the ever-elusive affective, individual, and cultural reward for women adhering to a well-planned and already-scripted life trajectory. The notion of pursuing happiness through finding the right work-family balance thus becomes a normalizing matrix that in-
terpellates all aspiring middle-class women and helps shape and direct wom-
en’s aspirations, desires, and behavior.5

While the work-family balance debate is not particularly new, the timing
of its resurgence and its feminist framing do require some unpacking. In the
1990s and into the early 2000s, liberal feminism was, in many ways, trans-
formed into “choice feminism” and eventually choice-as-postfeminism, par-
ticularly in and by the popular media (Gill 2007; Orloff and Schiff 2014;
Rodier and Meagher 2014). However, choice feminism for well-educated
middle-class women in the United States ultimately boiled down to an ex-
pectation that these women would choose between seriously pursuing
a demanding career or having a family life. Women were not actively en-
couraged to pursue both. This became particularly pronounced when the
US mainstream media began focusing on the so-called mommy wars, which
famously pitted well-educated women who chose to become stay-at-home
moms against professional working mothers, signifying that liberated women
now had a choice with respect to career and motherhood but that this choice
was either/or. The media, moreover, intimated that women could (and even
should) now happily ramp off the fast track and decide to stay home and
that professional women who choose to work during their children’s early
years were prioritizing their careers at the expense of their children (McRobbie
2013, 131).

This was precisely the time when Lisa Belkin’s influential and contro-
versial article, “The Opt-Out Revolution” (2003), which showcased a num-
ber of extremely well-educated women who had decided to stay at home
full-time with their children, was published to much ado in the New York
Times.6 The women Belkin interviewed all had college, if not advanced de-
grees, from elite universities, and they all framed their decision to ramp off
the fast track or stay home with their small children in terms of choice.
Belkin writes that “as these women look up at the ‘top,’ they are increas-
ingly deciding that they don’t want to do what it takes to get there.” One
of the women interviewed for the article added, “Women today, if we
think about feminism at all, we see it as a battle fought for ‘the choice.’ For
us, the freedom to choose work if we want to work is the feminist strain

5 The address extends beyond heterosexual middle-class women, increasingly incorpo-
rating all aspiring middle-class women, whether they are straight or not. Thus hetero-
sexual coupling can, as it were, simply be replaced by homonormative coupling, while the rest of the
script remains the same.

6 I concentrate on articles that appeared in the New York Times in large part because,
as Moon-Kie Jung states, “within mainstream journalism, it sits imperiously at the pinnacle”
(Jung 2015, 144).
in our lives.” Indeed, looking back at this period with its media hype over this so-called opt-out revolution, journalist Judith Warner reminds us that in 2000, books like Iris Krasnow’s *Surrendering to Motherhood*, a memoir about the liberation that accompanies giving up work to stay home, had a huge readership (Warner 2013). Warner also states that during that same year almost 40 percent of respondents to the General Social Survey told researchers they believed a mother’s working was harmful to her children.

Yet over the past ten years this either/or discourse has been receding in the United States, and balance has come to fill its place. Within the span of a single decade, the mainstream media representations of the conflict faced by this same population of women have changed. It actually appears that—at least at the discursive level—middle-class stay-at-home mothers are out, while self-identified feminist go-getters with children are in. The publication of Slaughter’s and Sandberg’s texts can be seen both as registering this change as well as helping to spark anew and contour the latest upsurge in feminist discussions. Rather than a simple outcome of the recession or of economic pressures, however, I read this shift as an effect of the entrenchment of neoliberal rationality and governmentality—in the Foucauldian sense of regulating the “conduct of conduct” (Gordon 1991, 48)—in addition to the ongoing transmutation of liberal feminism into a neoliberal variant. Indeed, through an examination of various articles discussing the idea of balance that have appeared since 2010, not only do we see a transformation in the either/or discourse, but the underlying message increasingly appears to be that women are responsible for crafting their own personal and felicitous equilibrium between career and family. The only way women can do this is by sequencing and planning well for their future.

In her 2013 *New York Times* article “Why Gender Equality Stalled,” Stephanie Coontz stresses that, in the past twenty years, cultural attitudes have shifted quite dramatically with respect to women, careers, and family. She underscores that, “in 1997, 56 percent of women ages 18 to 34 and 26 percent of middle-aged and older women said that, in addition to having a family, being successful in a high-paying career or profession was ‘very important’ or ‘one of the most important things’ in their lives [whereas] by 2011, fully two-thirds of the younger women and 42 percent of the older ones expressed that sentiment.” And, as if marking the end of the post-feminist era and the move (back) into a feminist one, the title of another 2013 *New York Times* article, written by Warner, reads “The Opt-Out Generation Wants Back In.” The women Warner interviewed are quite clear about the fact that they do not want to return to their old “pre-opting-out jobs” but wish they could have found some way, while their children were young, to combine spending time with their children with some sort of intel-
lectionally stimulating, respectably paying, and advancement-permitting flexible work.

This is precisely the point where the term *balance* enters the discussion as the solution and as a feminist ideal. It is not coincidental that Warner’s article appeared around the same time as the publication of Slaughter’s and Sandberg’s manifestos. Indeed, the elusive ideal of a happy balance can therefore be seen to link this and other *New York Times* articles, *Lean In*, and “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” in a complex cultural web; all of these works (re)produce the contemporary and increasingly widespread currency of mainstream feminism. *Balance* is exactly the promise of successfully negotiating the two pulls on contemporary liberated middle-class womanhood: the importance of cultivating a career on the one hand and the importance of being a hands-on mother on the other. Indeed, for the past few years, *balance* as the progressive or liberated feminist solution has saturated the popular imagination and has served as the background for various mainstream representations as well as discussions about how to solve the conflict between well-educated women, work, and family (Rottenberg 2014a). More recently, however, a further transformation in the discourse can be discerned that increasingly presents balance as a promise for the future.

**Neoliberal feminism and futurity**

In the wake of Slaughter’s and Sandberg’s texts, there have been a slew of articles in mainstream and even progressive media venues in the United States, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Huffington Post*, and the *Atlantic*, in which the notion of work-family balance for women has been explored in different ways. When examining various representative articles that depict hookup culture on college campuses and egg freezing in the corporate world, a clear pattern emerges: there is not only a distinct and growing insistence that well-educated women need to establish their careers before thinking of family but also a growing cultural acceptance, if not outright encouragement, of this trajectory. Postponing childrearing until one’s early thirties is increasingly being depicted as the preferable life sequence for this population of women—and the one that has the most chance of leading to a felicitous balance down the line.

In a July 2013 *New York Times* article, Kate Taylor describes a rising phenomenon among middle-class undergraduate women in elite universities (Taylor 2013; see also Marcotte 2012). Holding up women like Sandberg and Slaughter as their role models, many potentially high-achieving young women are presented as 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. The women interviewed by Taylor declared that they envision their twenties as a period of unencumbered striving, when they might work at a bank in Hong Kong for one year, then go to business school, then move to a corporate job in New York. According to the article, young women assume that they need to take this decade to invest in themselves, since they also assume they are going to have plenty of time to focus on their husband and kids once they have established themselves professionally. The idea of lugging a relationship through all those transitions seems too difficult for many of these young women to imagine. Moreover, Taylor describes these women as invoking a very neat metric of “cost-benefit” when they speak about sexual relationships. Hooking up rather than cultivating a relationship during their first decade of adulthood prioritizes lowering risk and investment costs. Self-care, pleasure in the form of casual sex, and an investment in their own professional advancement are the motivations behind these women’s preferences. Reproduction, according to the article’s conclusions, is the farthest thing from their minds at this stage in life.

It is important to note that these same young women do not reject the family part of the balance equation. Most of the women Taylor interviewed still planned to get married, but they were insistent that matrimony would not be on their horizons until they were in their early thirties. Yet not one of the interviewees mentions the possibility of staying at home once their children are born. These young women also tend to identify as feminists, and from their interviews it seems clear that they firmly believe in the wisdom of careful planning for the future. This is accomplished by building their professional resume in the present while postponing family life until their thirties.

Taylor’s article about hookup culture for the New York Times came on the heels of another much-talked-about piece by Hanna Rosin. Writing for the Atlantic, Rosin (2012) also reports on the hookup culture among undergraduate and graduate students in their later twenties. Best known for her controversial book The End of Men, on which the article is based, Rosin writes: “Single young women in their sexual prime—that is, their 20s and early 30s—are for the first time in history more successful, on average, than the single young men around them.” While empirically this appears to be a dubious claim, Rosin, too, appears to be registering a shift in cultural norms. The article clearly frames the development of college and postcollege hookup culture as part of the feminist and sexual revolution. Rosin suggests that this remarkable freedom has become possible not merely due to the pill or legal abortion but because of the emergence of an entirely new landscape of sexual freedom—the ability to delay marriage and
have temporary relationships that don’t derail an education or a career. Similar to Taylor, Rosin concludes that, “for college girls these days, an overly serious suitor fills the same role an accidental pregnancy did in the 19th century: a danger to be avoided at all costs, lest it get in the way of a promising future.” While the women interviewed in these articles may not be a representative sample of women from their age or racial group, the articles themselves carry out a certain kind of cultural work. The language in both is one of cost-benefit and self-investment. And, also like Taylor’s article, the promising future for the women in Rosin’s piece still ultimately includes both a successful professional life and a fulfilling family life. The mainstream cultural and feminist expectations—which are strangely converging—is that women still can and should have a family life, but young middle-class women are encouraged to postpone this part of the equation until after they have developed their professional possibilities and built up their individual portfolios. Thus, it is not that cultivating a career necessarily trumps family life—at least not yet—but this suspension of balance does defer the motherhood part of the equation.

This insistence on a well-planned life and on the importance of self-investment emerged yet again when the mainstream media shifted its focus from college students to professional women in their mid- to late twenties and early thirties. This shift, of course, is not coincidental. The recent sexual assault scandals on university campuses in the United States have made it much more difficult to lionize hookup culture in the way Rosin did just a few years ago. And while there has been public outrage at universities’ inaptitude when confronted with sexual assault cases, a certain exposure of a long history of covering up sexual abuse on campus, and, of course, the mobilization of students across the country, the mainstream media has mostly diverted attention away from these sexual assault scandals. At the same time, the exaltation of women who strive to have it all by pursuing a career and planning for a future family has not disappeared. Rather, the ideal of future balance discourse has found its way into a new venue: slightly older women who are currently working in their respective professions. It is in this shift of focus from college to professional women that the question and the quandary of reproduction emerge in more explicit terms.

Theorizing the gender of futurity
While many political and cultural theorists have convincingly illustrated how neoliberal rationality is producing subjects as entrepreneurial actors who are calculating and self-regulating (Larner 2000; Brown 2003; McRobbie 2013), much less attention has been paid to the particular temporality of
neoliberal rationality and how an avowed emphasis on futurity or future returns may increasingly be serving as a new modality of what Michel Foucault (1988) has famously called “technologies of the self.” My claim thus draws on the recent work of Wendy Brown, who theorizes how neoliberal reason produces subjects who are expected to “comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value . . . through practices of entrepreneurism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors” (2015, 22). I would like, however, to place the mobilization of futurity at center stage, as key to producing this neoliberal subject. If, as Brown cogently argues, neoliberal rationality has disseminated the market model to more and more domains and activities, and if humans are quickly becoming self-investing capital that constantly attempts to enhance its market value over time, then futurity seems to be central to the neoliberal mechanism of governance. This is most clearly seen, I suggest, in the address to upwardly mobile middle-class women and the production of a neoliberal feminist subject.

Indeed, there is a striking gendered aspect to the avowed emphasis on futurity. Futurity as a technology of the self is arguably most evident in neoliberalism’s hailing of upwardly mobile women, who are still constantly told that they must worry about their biological clock if they want to have it all. High-potential men are also interpellated as self-investing human capital, but the added and very clear injunction to sequence their lives carefully in order to achieve work-family balance at a future point is much less prominent in their interpellation; once sequence enters into the equation, it does not focus on juggling reproduction and career, as it does for women, but rather on professional advancement.7 There is, accordingly, nothing particularly novel about the normative cultural injunction that upwardly mobile men invest strategically in their career development; consequently, the operation of futurity is, I suggest, rendered less perceptible in the address to men.

Given the growing mainstream acceptance, and even emphasis, on postponing motherhood for women, the futurity of the promise of balance is—at least to feminist critics—striking. The effort to keep potentially powerful women on a particular normative path in the present so that they can os-

7 There is simply no comparison when we think about the amount of attention the media pays to powerful men with very small children as opposed to powerful women with very small children—one has only to think of the brouhaha around Marissa Mayer, who was pregnant when she was named as the new CEO of Yahoo! By contrast, few people likely know that the CEO of Google, Larry Page, has two small children, born in 2009 and 2011. Moreover, when the issues relate to men’s concerns, the term most often used is work-life conflict; when discussing women, the term usually slips to work-family balance.
tensibly enjoy the fruits of their (self-)investment in the future includes not only professional advancement and enhancement prescriptions but also injunctions regarding how to regulate and potentially exploit their reproductive capabilities. Women’s value as women, and thus their individual futures and returns, are still linked to being able to have children (thus women’s value in the marketplace, as it were, is still associated with maternity), but this link seems to be progressively weakening, at least among a certain population of women.

I further account for this divergent gendered address below. Here, however, I would like to emphasize how the promise of future enhanced capital returns—rather than, say, concern with risk management, as Ulrich Beck (1992; see also Adam, Beck, and Van Loon 2000) has so famously argued—seems increasingly to operate as one key contemporary technology of the self. For high-potential women, the promise of future returns clearly helps to ensure that each individual woman concentrates on her own particular life plan, encouraging her to augment her individual capital by building her portfolio. It depoliticizes feminism—defanging even liberal feminism’s imminent critique, which invoked liberalism’s language of universal equality to expose historic gendered contradictions and elisions. This new form of feminism is also reordering space, eroding notions of the private sphere (as well as the public sphere) in the process. While many radical and materialist feminists have long dreamed of the spatial and conceptual breakdown of the division between the private and the public, what we are currently witnessing is not a rethinking of the private-public divide but rather, I propose, the slow and devastating erosion of feminism’s emancipatory impetus. Nor is this merely the strategic co-optation of liberal feminism by neoliberalism; it is the steady evacuation of an alternative feminist vocabulary, particularly since in most streams of feminism, emancipation has been conceived in relation to women’s ability to disarticulate their link to the private sphere and enter into the public sphere (see Scott 2011). Moreover, neoliberalism’s colonization of feminism is simultaneously producing a very clear distinction between female subjects who are worthy because they are aspirational and thus convertible and the majority of female subjects, who are deemed irredeemable due to their insufficient aspirations and responsibilization.

**Freezing eggs**

McRobbie (2013) suggests that new neoliberal norms of middle-class aspirational life are currently being intensely directed at women because women are ultimately seen as responsible for holding together family life. As a result of the entrenchment of neoliberalism in Britain alongside the steady
divestment in social programs, the family is currently being cast as a small business in need of management while children are considered to be human capital. This, in turn, has the effect of entrepreneurializing domestic life and thus giving a more professional status to full-time mothers. While this may well be the case in the United Kingdom, I propose that in the United States, the discourse is coalescing around women themselves as human capital, who must self-invest in order to enhance their portfolios’ value. This, in turn, creates a profound ambivalence with respect to how to manage issues of children and family life. 

An example of the new acceptance of postponing motherhood—to some ill-defined future moment—can be found in more recent articles about Facebook’s and Apple’s decision to pay for female employees to freeze their eggs, which sparked heated discussions across Europe and the United States after news of this first appeared in venues ranging from the Guardian to CNN in October 2014. These articles disclosed a new policy in which various Silicon Valley firms and corporations would begin covering egg freezing as part of their employees’ benefits packages. Even more than the articles discussing hookup culture among undergraduate and postgraduate students, this series of articles emphasized the increasing importance that women and US society are placing on women’s professional advancement.

The message of both the initiative as well as the articles is clear: women are increasingly interested in establishing careers during their twenties and thirties, but these same women do not want to jeopardize the possibility of having children at some future point. By offering employees this benefit, these companies ostensibly recognize the importance of family life while they legitimate women’s desire to establish their careers before having children. As one of the women interviewed for an article declared: “The pressure is off, and I feel so empowered. . . . I can now concentrate on my career and becoming who I want to be before having children!” (in Ridley 2014).

The countless articles that have taken up the subject warn that currently egg freezing is expensive and still at the experimental stages. They also underscore that the women who are lining up for the new procedure are, at the moment, the overachievers, the aspiring law firm partners, the ambitious actresses, the medical school residents—in other words, the 1 percent. As Sarah Wildman (2013), writing for New York Magazine, suggests, these are “women who are acutely aware of feminism’s cruel catch: the narrow fertility window that’s been narrowed even further through years of schooling, serial dating, and career advancement. They are boxed in by mixed messages: 40 is the new 30! But be sure to have your children before you turn 35.” Egg freezing seems to provide a solution to this dilemma. Wildman further sug-
gests that in “all likelihood, the [egg-freezing] technology will eventually get there. Even detractors see egg freezing as becoming standard practice in the next five years. Someday, one endocrinologist told me, girls will get braces on their teeth when they turn 12, freeze their eggs when they graduate from college, and get pregnant whenever they want.” According to this prediction, reproduction will eventually be uncoupled from any notion of the biological clock, and women will be able to have children (or not) whenever they so desire.

These articles clearly demonstrate that the postponement of childbearing has become part and parcel of the newest upsurge of feminist discourse that revolves around investment in the self, building one’s portfolio and credit rating, and enhancing one’s market value. As another woman interviewed in Wildman’s article articulated very clearly, “It’s like, I’m me!, I don’t feel like [marriage, kids] is where I’m supposed to be right now.” Middle- and upper-class women are currently being intepellated as responsible for planning their lives—or responsibilized—so that each individual woman can cultivate a career and have a family once she has sufficiently established herself professionally.

Yet it also seems clear that the postponement of childbearing and the developing of egg-freezing technology will likely lead to the further economization of reproduction. Once certain women are able to freeze their eggs successfully, rent a womb, and hire various caregivers, new and intensified forms of racialized and classed gender exploitation will occur. Indeed, this trajectory of powerful women is bound to produce new populations of dispensable service providers, the vast majority of whom will be women. As Hannah Seligson (2013) puts it in her article “The True Cost of Leaning In,” women who want a “big career” and a family need a whole army of service providers to pull it off: a nanny, a housekeeper, and a baby nurse. These providers will carry out “the schlepping, cooking, cleaning, child care, and laundry” and will cost “about $96,261 per year.”

Ironically, however, precisely as neoliberalism colonizes more and more domains of human life, pushing to convert middle-class women into human capital, neoliberal feminism also operates—at the moment—as a peculiar pushback to this total conversion by paradoxically and counterintuitively maintaining reproduction (alongside professional development) as part of the normative trajectory for upwardly mobile women. While neoliberal feminism further entrenches neoliberal rationality and helps to facilitate the rapidly progressing cultural conversion and remaking of certain female subjects into human capital, its emergence also underscores that the conversion of middle-class women is not yet complete given that reproduction is still part of the normative address to these women.
The transformation of the balance discourse into a mode of futurity, however, suggests that certain gender linkages are being attenuated while new forms of gendered subjecthood are being spawned. Insofar as neoliberalism reduces human and individual freedom to freedom as it is conceived in the domain of the market, the threshold between the private and public collapses. Unlike liberalism, with its constitutive private-public divide, neoliberalism has neither a lexicon nor a framework for addressing unwaged work or activity within the family. On the one hand, then, neoliberal feminism is helping to produce wages for housework and for childcare by outsourcing these tasks to women deemed nonaspirational. Namely, there will increasingly be a whole class of women who are compensated for housework and childcare in the homes of aspirational women, while the reproductive and affective labor that they perform in their own homes will remain uncompensated and unvalued. This underscores how certain labor is compensated, while other labor is not, as well as the exclusive investment in those children who are potentially valuable enough to have their care enter the productive labor. Moreover, it also points to a significant irony in the way a revolutionary Marxist campaign can be co-opted and rerouted by the neoliberal order. Indeed, rather than serving as a path to liberation, wages for housework and care work serve to further expand and entrench market rationality, while they concurrently create and reinforce new forms of class-based and racialized gender stratification and exploitation. On the other hand, if everything, even people themselves, is simply reduced to a cost-benefit calculus based on capital investment and appreciation, then reproductive activity and care work have no conceptual space in this new order. In other words, reproductive work and caregiving continue to be “invisible infrastructure for all developing, mature, and worn-out human capital, children, adults, disabled, and elderly” (Brown 2015, 105).

**Conclusion**

It is important to note, by way of conclusion, that liberal feminism—which has always been hegemonic in US feminism and has always insisted on women’s right to enter the public sphere on equal terms with men (Funk 2013)—conceives of emancipation as a move from the private to the public domain (see Scott 2011; Farris, forthcoming). Feminist discussions, such as Hochschild’s classic The Second Shift and her later The Time Bind (2001), as well as work inspired by Hochschild, such as At the Heart of Work and Family

8 This formulation is Miranda Outman’s, and I am taking it from a private correspondence (May 26, 2016).
(Garey and Hansen 2011), have underscored women’s difficult negotiation of work and home life, particularly given the deeply entrenched assumption that women are still ultimately responsible for domestic duties. Indeed, many feminist political theorists have already, crucially, demonstrated that liberalism, particularly as it manifests itself in modern democracies, is constituted through and structured around the private-public bifurcation—where the public domain is the realm in which rights are exercised and individuality is expressed, while the private sphere of family is the domain governed by needs and affective ties (see, e.g., Elshtain 1981; Pateman 1988; Brown 1995). As part of their dominant political imaginary, liberal democracies produced and maintained a discursive and normative distinction between the private and public spheres. This distinction, of course, has always been gendered and has served to naturalize the sexual division of labor within liberal democracies.

Moreover, the very bifurcation of the private and the public is itself produced through the presupposition that men circulate in civil society, while women are stationed in the family. Liberalism must consequently be understood to be constituted through a spatialized gender division, which has meant that reproduction has presented a quandary and a remainder for liberal feminism from its very inception. If women’s emancipation is conceived as their “engagement in the same activities as men” (Scott 2011, 33), then where do reproduction and care work fit into this conception of emancipation? In more theoretical terms, the quandary of reproduction and care work continue to haunt and thwart liberal feminism’s conception of emancipation, dependent as it is on the private-public divide and the unwitting privileging of the public sphere as the site of liberation. Put simply, somebody still needs to do the care work, and that somebody has historically been women.

In many ways, neoliberal balance discourse emerged as a way of solving the dilemma of reproduction, as well as the double shift, by (re)inscribing motherhood as a normative part of women’s individual life trajectories. Intensive mothering and the discourse of a happy balance have entered public discussion as part of the rise of neoliberal feminism, not simply as a backlash against the gains of liberal feminism. Neoliberal rationality is currently converging with liberal feminist discourse, since the conversion of subjects into self-investing human capital dovetails with the notion of professional success as emancipation. In addition, neoliberal rationality has incorporated the ideal of a happy work-family balance, which is also a liberal feminist legacy (Rottenberg 2014a). The futurity of the work-family balance consequently serves as a means of managing the dilemma of reproduction and the increasingly invisible (because disavowed and increasingly out-
sourced) sexual division of labor. As mentioned above, we are witnessing the slow but still incomplete conversion of middle-class women into human capital because neoliberal feminism still incorporates reproduction as part of its normative address to this population of women.

This not yet complete process of conversion is quite clearly seen in contemporary media representations of young high-potential women who are encouraged to postpone but not (yet) renounce reproduction. The technology is developing in such a way, however, that this population of women will likely be increasingly able to outsource reproduction and care work, thus ensuring the reentrenchment of the aspirational subject as human capital, on the one hand, and a whole other class of women who are conceived as not fully responsibilized and thus as exploitable and disposable, on the other. Once the conversion of middle-class women is more or less complete, balance will gain a completely different meaning, since these women will no longer be carrying out reproductive or care work but rather—at most—managing it. And when this occurs, the disavowal of gender subordination and a renaturalization of the sexual division of labor will also be more or less complete. Moreover, as market rationality erodes the private-public divide, rendering it meaningless, waging even the weak immanent liberal feminist critique of gender subordination will become increasingly difficult. Finally, once the outsourcing of reproduction and care work becomes even more widespread than it is today, there will be a complete splitting of female subjecthood: the worthy, capital-enhancing female few and the disavowed rest.

It is therefore not coincidental that futurity is developing within neoliberal feminism, since the promise of balance in the future helps to cover up one of neoliberal rationality’s most vulnerable fault lines in the present: its presumption of, and yet inability to recognize, the gendered conditions of possibility for the production of human capital in the first place: care work. But as more and more of these high-powered women purchase both reproduction and care work, the discourse of balance will likely recede. Thus, neoliberal feminism simultaneously—and frighteningly—helps to produce a small class of aspirational subjects who self-invest wisely and augment their capital value and a large class of women who are rendered expendable, exploitable, and disposable.

As this happens—and more specifically, as the conceptual threshold between private and public collapses further through market rationality’s infiltration of all spheres of life—we will also have less and less purchase or leverage with which to critique neoliberal rationality. Neoliberal feminism is not only shorn of all obligations to less privileged women, while it actually produces new classes of disempowered women; it is also makes alternative
futures difficult to envision, since it actively and performatively forgets the conditions that naturalize sexual difference, and it leaves us stunned in the face of a fading lexicon of critique.

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