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## **"Lean In" While Holding up "Half the Sky": On the Marketing of Neoliberal Feminism**

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In this paper I want to raise some issues about the unprecedented success of the women's movement in placing women's issues on the agenda of national and international institutions. Unlike some of my sisters and colleagues in the movement I do not regard this "success" as something to celebrate unconditionally. *Au contraire*: as I hope to show, some of the mainstream acolytes of women and women's issues are not always to be trusted.

In particular I take a look at two recent books, both of them purporting to be in the name of feminism and women's emancipation. The first is the best-seller *Half the Sky*, by New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof and his Chinese wife Sheryl Wu Dunn. The second is the equally well-known volume by Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In*, which comes accompanied by a website and "small peer groups" that you and I can join.

Hence my title: "Leaning In While Holding Up Half the Sky." ( I should mention a more recent book, just issued, which picks up on some of the same themes, although I do not discuss it here: former President Jimmy Carter has just published *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power*. Carter announced on March 25, 2014, in an interview on Al-Jazeera, that the issues facing women and girls are the most important issues in the world today. )

As noted, I want to place my discussion of these two volumes in the context of the analysis I did in my book *Feminism Seduced* (2009), in which I argue that the hard work and organizing and intellectual contributions of the second wave of the women's movement have

been co-opted and used by corporations, national governments, and international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund essentially to hijack feminism in the interests of globalized capitalist forces. I ask the question: why has the worldwide women's movement failed to address a serious challenge to the hegemony of neoliberalism across the globe? Surely a movement to seek equality for the women of the world should have been part of the resistance to globalization, with its attendant shredding of the safety net and devastation of the public sector (an important employer of women). Instead, we have seen the rise of what I have called "hegemonic" feminism, in a "dangerous liaison" with capitalism.<sup>i</sup> Overall the book represents my attempt to bring together a Marxist political economic framework with a gender analysis, seeking to develop what is in effect a political economy of gender.

What do I mean by "hegemonic feminism?" I borrowed Gramsci's term "hegemony" "to refer to the dominant set of ideas established by ruling elites and accepted without question as the "common sense" of a society, and R.W. Connell's expression "hegemonic masculinity," to refer to that form of bourgeois feminism that argues for women's full incorporation into the economic life of capitalism, as workers, or managers, or investors."<sup>ii</sup> The full range of demands brought forward by the brilliant activists and theorists of "second wave" feminism would have, if met, produced a social revolution of a kind not previously either envisaged or accomplished in practice: from full access to reproductive rights to an end to patriarchal violence (rape, incest, sexual trafficking) and racism; education, housing, incomes for all; a range of family forms incorporating LGBT rights; a sustainable environment; and so on. A socialist revolution with a feminist agenda; or maybe a feminist revolution with a socialist agenda.

Instead, I argue that the agenda of the women's movement in all of its varieties has been cleverly and diabolically shaped by the dominant cultural and economic engines of capitalism, narrowed down into the most widely recognized and accepted meaning of feminism, namely, paid work for women, along with access to the levers of capitalist power for an elite few. I argue in the book that this form of feminism has received widespread plaudits and acceptance as part of a broad imperialist agenda of cultural and economic domination by the United States and the other rich countries.

Seizing upon feminism's core demand of paid work for women, a new vocabulary and set of ideals has been set forth which has a particular ideological function. In contrast to the revolutionary ideals of those countries that have sought and continue to seek economic self-determination (such as Cuba), we are told that the key to ending poverty, creating wealth, and producing social justice is in fact the "empowering" of women.

Let me now turn to the two books I want to highlight. The first, as mentioned, is that of Nicholas Kristof and his wife Sheryl Wu Dunn, whose best-selling book *Half the Sky* is now linked to a PBS special. In this they call for a new women's movement, comparable in scale and effectiveness to the anti-slavery movement of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. They call on people everywhere, but especially their US audience, to participate in the charitable enterprises which, they claim, are bettering the lives of women everywhere. K/W echo the sentiments of the international financial institutions and the United Nations, and quote government officials and development officers around the world, to the effect that the improvement of women's lives will be the key to ending poverty and suffering in the Third World.

The book is sprinkled with inspiring stories of young women who have endured unbearable experiences – fistulas from unassisted childbirths during which the baby died in the birth canal; repeated rape and assault by soldiers in the endless wars of Rwanda, the Congo and elsewhere; marital rape, beatings, and confinement to the home; and sexual trafficking, followed by imprisonment and brutality in brothels. In each case, the women receive assistance – the last example in the book being the gift of a goat from Heifers International – and end up overcoming their sufferings, becoming educated, and rising to become a leader in their own country.

The moral of the story is clear. First, women are the key to a more prosperous, just world; and second, interventions through charitable organizations, in collaboration with grassroots women's leadership, can make unimaginable change happen. K/W cite in particular the success of the organization Tostan in Senegal in beginning the process of ending FGC/FGM in more than 2000 villages, no doubt a remarkable achievement.

Nowhere, however, in K/D's admittedly moving narrative is there any mention of the neoliberal policies of the last two or more decades, with their devastating effects in the Third World countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. And indeed there is similarly no mention of

the austerity policies currently being imposed in the First World countries of Greece, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland, which have created massive cuts to the public sector with resulting unemployment rates of 25% and rising. In the current crisis over the Ukraine, with President Vladimir Putin's welcoming of the Crimea back to Russia, there is little media coverage of what the IMF, the European Union and the United States are planning for the Ukrainian people in the way of severe austerity. The contradiction between the rosy predictions of K/D about the possibilities for individuals rising above suffering, and the intensified, unrelenting suffering caused by macroeconomic policies, is not acknowledged.

My second text is *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, the best-selling book by the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook. The book is part of a larger campaign, as described on Sandberg's website:

Leanin.Org is the nonprofit organization founded by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg to empower all women to achieve their ambitions. Leanin.Org offers inspiration and support through an online community, free expert lectures and Lean.In Circles, small peer groups who meet regularly to share and learn together.

A glance at Sandberg's "lean-in" webpage ([leanin.org](http://leanin.org)) leads us to the site of her newest campaign, to ban the word "bossy" in reference to women (<http://banbossy.com/>). Sandberg is pictured alongside Condoleezza Rice holding up "ban bossy" pins, and we are given the following information: "When a little boy asserts himself, he's called a 'leader.' Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded 'bossy.' By middle school, girls are less interested in leading than boys – a trend that continues into adulthood. Together we can encourage girls to lead." By the way there is also a "shop Lean-In" section where you can buy a baby onesie or a mug with the slogan "lean in."

*Lean-In* is a self-help book for women seeking to climb the corporate ladder, but finding themselves blocked by the glass ceiling. In contrast to K/W, who barely cite any feminist authors (with the exception of a quote from Eve Ensler and a few others), Sandberg's footnotes are stuffed with citations to gender research on behavioral differences between men and women. Like W/D Sandberg is convinced that the current forms of discrimination against women need to be eliminated in order to create a better world.

Her helpful advice to women, encapsulated in her title, is that while of course there are real-world barriers to women in the United States including a lack of universal child care, no paid maternity leave, unequal pay, sexual harassment at the workplace ... nonetheless women themselves have it within their power to “lean in,” and that is, take authority in a way that competitive men (including Sheryl’s brother whom she cites as a role model) do without thinking. Men always ask for a second offer when negotiating, says Sandberg, while women are inclined to take the first offer. (This is for jobs at the level of executive within the corporation. Sandberg has nothing to say to low-paid women employees at Wal-Mart and elsewhere.) It is worth noting that in her book, women are addressed in an undifferentiated way. There is no obeisance here to the obligatory “intersectional” analysis now standard issue in Women’s Studies writing, and indeed no mention of Black women, women of color, immigrant women, lesbian women, or any other subdivision of women as a category.

The book is written in a breathless, girly style, belying what must be the steely persona behind the elegant brunette depicted on the cover, chatting to the reader about the experiences leading her to write the book. She triumphantly recounts her victory in getting Google to open parking spaces for pregnant women close to the office, after trekking (heavily pregnant herself) from the furthest reaches of the parking lot. And lo and behold! All she had to do was ask, and this is now policy at her former company.

And she sympathizes with what she portrays as the generic woman, who was raised to smile and be nice, while her brother was raised to compete with no holds barred. In some ways the book takes me back to the first discussion of sex roles in the academy, when Women’s Studies was in its infancy, and researchers dutifully tracked the socialization patterns that had for decades relegated women to the role of wife and mother, while men were trained to climb the corporate ladder.

Speaking of leaning in, it is worth noting that Sandberg got her start when Larry Summers, former President of Harvard, notoriously fired after his unfortunate remarks about the dearth of women in science – also former economist at Princeton and former executive of the World Bank -- read her undergraduate thesis, and offered her a job at the World Bank, which is, says Sandberg, an organization devoted to ending poverty. [Sic.] We might also mention in passing a related media flap about “having it all,” occasioned by the cri-de-coeur from Anne-

Marie Slaughter, now back at Princeton University, formerly a high State Department official, reproaching feminism for promising that it was going to be possible for women to put together work, family, ambition, power, and gourmet cooking.... (See Slaughter, 2012.)

All of this, of course, is what Linda Burnham has dubbed “1% feminism,” the feminism of the 1%. To quote Burnham,

To the extent that having it all means having a brilliant, fulfilling, highly compensated career plus a load-bearing partner and a happy home life, that conversation is dead on arrival for the 99%. Most expect to be driven hard, paid little, burdened by debt and, eventually, cast aside. While leaning in at the managers’ meeting might move a woman up the corporate jungle gym, it’s not going to change the fundamentally exploitative work environments that require workers, male and female, to be chained to their computers and cell phones during every waking hour, devolving to the pathetic state wherein their identities are co-terminus with their job titles. There’s no amount of leaning in that will solve the riddle of how to juggle multiple low-wage jobs plus a family. Nearly every working woman who chooses to have children knows that she will spend years of her life scrambling like a maniac, with a partner or without, figuring out infant and childcare, after-school care, summer activities for when school is out of session, what to do when the cough turns into a fever, etc., etc., etc. However endowed we are with confidence, courage and ambition, short of having the cold, hard cash to solve some of these problems by throwing money (and probably some other woman’s labor) at them, it’s awfully hard to find the wherewithal to lean in. (Burnham, 2013).

By way of lifting our vision above the spectacle of “leaning in” and “having it all,” I think it is important to state that the number one problem facing the world today is not the fate of women and girls, but the fate of capitalism. Indeed we could argue that the number one problem isolated by these writers, namely, the violation of the rights of women and girls, is a primary symptom of what needs to change in the world, namely, a system based on profit and private property.

We are living in an era of what the French call “savage capitalism,” a system where regulation is systematically repealed or evaded, where there are few brakes on the intense pursuit

of gain at the expense of human dignity, and where the dissolution of ties in communities and families in favor of the creation of competing individuals who participate in an increasingly desperate struggle for jobs and subsistence facilitates the power of corporations and diminishes the effectiveness of collective organizing by unions and communities.

Is it possible that the “discovery” by the international elites of women’s issues is a progressive development? Am I wrong to interpret this entirely as a cynical use of feminism? Only time will tell. But I continue to argue that as feminists, we should view the newly minted compassion of the Kristofs, WuDunns, Sheryl Sandbergs and Jimmy Carters of this world with profound suspicion. And as for the admonition that we should “lean in,” Sandberg is really telling women that we should “buy in,” and accept that the only real feminist position is to be climbing the ladder within a corrupt capitalist system. I hope that younger generations will be suspicious of this paradigm, and will continue to ask how feminists can build a tradition that points away from neoliberal capitalism and toward another world altogether.

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<sup>i</sup> See Eisenstein, 2005; see also Fraser, 2013, who has adopted my locution, while not always attributing it to me.

<sup>ii</sup> See Gramsci, 1971; Connell, 1995.