

Alison Phipps

# The Politics of the Body

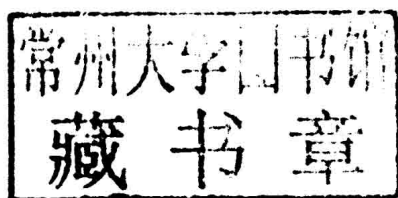
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# The Politics of the Body

*Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age*

ALISON PHIPPS



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## **The Politics of the Body**

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grown, some of the debates covered here will have moved on in positive ways, and the feminist movement in particular will have found a way to negotiate a fraught and difficult macro-political context. Judging from the passion, thoughtfulness and good grace shown by so many of my feminist students (of all genders), I have great hopes that this will be the case. I would like to thank my students for being the biggest pleasure of my working life, and give especial thanks to Tom Chadwick who provided me with valuable research assistance for this book. Any errors or omissions in the text are solely my responsibility.

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## *Introduction*

In the summer of 2010, I was heavily pregnant with my first child. One early evening, as the nights were drawing in, my partner and I attended a barbecue organized by neighbours in Brighton: the predictably cosmopolitan, left-leaning crowd. One couple in particular, directors of a local alternative theatre company, talked us through the home water birth of their third baby, which they had celebrated the previous year. As I shared anxieties about my own impending delivery, the experienced father provided reassurance and various tips on how to deal with the pain without resorting to drugs or epidural anaesthesia. Giving birth should come naturally to women, he said – it was something we had all been designed to do. Furthermore, it was a process which would put me in touch with my strength and my powerful, primal self. My partner, understandably, wanted to know what he ought to do while I was undergoing this transformative experience. ‘You protect the door of the cave,’ he was told. The incident gave us much to talk about in terms of the juxtaposition between an unapologetically biologically essentialist narrative and its otherwise unconventional source. Although this book is not a personal one, it has been inspired by experiences such as this, which led me to want to explore the



contemporary discursive and political terrain around issues to do with women's bodies.<sup>1</sup>

I began this research in 2008 after a discussion in one of my postgraduate feminist theory classes. The episode inspired me to reflect upon the difficulties of positioning for contemporary feminist theory and activism in a political context characterized by binaries and extremes and in which women's bodies have become battlegrounds both material and symbolic. In class, an Iranian student, who had chosen not to adopt the chador, was presenting her view of practices of veiling in her country as essentially oppressive and a reflection of a patriarchal value system. The room was silent while she spoke, in deference to her first-hand experience and also highlighting the discomfort many western students feel around voicing opinions about politically loaded topics in Othered cultures. However, before her narrative was finished, she was interrupted by a white European student, who had come top of the class in the previous term's feminist theory assignment and who gently explained to her Iranian colleague the empowerment she felt could be granted and expressed through the choice to cover one's face, body and/or hair. This incident was fascinating in its reversal of the usual problematic between feminists from the West and women from Muslim-majority societies. It spoke to potential shifts in the political and academic landscape in the West which I felt needed to be set in a broader context.

I chose to focus my research on four contemporary western debates centred on women's bodies which have been marked by controversy and contention: sexual violence, gender and Islam, sex work, and childbirth and breastfeeding. During the course of a number of years embedded in the fields of literature, media and politics around these issues, I found much experiential material which provided alternative stories to those narrated above. As any ethnographer knows, the arena of human feeling, thought and action will always be full of diversity, multiplicity and contradiction. However, as I began to follow different threads and piece together the web of discourses and power relations which constitute contemporary orthodoxies around the issues in question, a number of important common themes started to emerge.

Some were highlighted in existing research, and others emerged as I trawled through a huge variety of primary sources – policy documents and reports, newspapers, magazines, novels, blogs and other media – and conducted informal interviews with key official and unofficial political actors. As I worked, I found myself asking difficult questions: how, in the same period, have left-wingers, academics and other political progressives simultaneously defended powerful men accused of sex crimes, been critiqued for ignoring honour killings and other ‘culture-based’ forms of gender violence, positioned topless tabloid pictures as empowering, and opposed these same pictures for sexualizing breasts and undermining the breastfeeding which is an essential part of ‘natural motherhood’? Exploring these pointed me each time to the same common factor: the contemporary political and economic coalition of neoliberalism and neoconservatism which has put opposition movements very much on the defensive. This, I found, has posed particular dilemmas for feminism, which is currently enjoying a resurgence but has perhaps never operated in a more difficult political and cultural milieu.

This book, then, engages with the current state of feminism in relation to mainstream and popular political discourse and the framework of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in particular. It presents a challenge to emergent retrosexism on both the right and left wing of contemporary politics, as well as what I view as problematic developments within feminism itself: a focus on women’s agency and identity at the expense of examining framing structures; a reluctance to moralize or adopt ‘victim’ positions which can be seen as silencing and which maps onto the omnipresent politics of personal responsibility; and ‘radical’ movements in the spheres of both sexuality and health which leave unchallenged the role of the capitalist market, the material and discursive framings of contemporary femininities (especially how ‘progressive’ forms may still be retrograde in their lineage or effects), and the operation of privilege. Overall, I contend that the rejection of neoconservative themes, agendas and institutions has within much feminist thought and action produced ideas and politics which can be seen as neoliberal in their emphasis on agency, ‘empowerment’ and

individual choice. This is a development of Eisenstein's (2010) work on the co-optation of liberal feminism by corporate capitalism, and Fraser's (2009, 2013) analysis of feminism's relationship with neoliberalism, in which she elucidates how elements of the feminist critique of capitalism, namely those focused on cultural and identity-based recognition, have been co-opted in the current political context, while structural and economic themes have been lost or transmuted into individualistic self-betterment goals. My work provides a detailed account of the impact of these discursive shifts in a variety of different topic areas, also showing how it is not just liberal but postmodern, postcolonial and 'third wave' forms of feminism which have been seduced by the market, and incorporating the dialectic between neoliberalism and neoconservatism which has affected left-wing movements in particular, and feminism especially, due to synergies between radical feminist activism and 'law and order' agendas (Brown 1995; Bumiller 2008).

Although many of the issues covered in this book are over-researched and debated, my analysis is genealogical (Foucault 1977) in its concern with how the discussions themselves are constructed: the concepts and rhetorics or 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980: 131) deployed, the political allegiances being made, and their contextual conditions of possibility. Following Fraser and Gordon (1994: 310), my approach is based on the conviction that politics has a role to play in defining social reality and that, furthermore, particular terms (or in my analysis, concepts and modes of thought and action) become sites at which identity and experience can be negotiated and contested. Genealogy, then, involves looking critically at the taken-for-granted meanings which populate social and political spheres and uncovering their underlying assumptions. This encompasses starting from particular case studies and progressively taking a wider and wider lens, comparing these to other empirical examples to establish general trends, but also attempting to contextualize these in relation to historical lineages and broad institutional, economic, social, political and cultural discourses and structures, paying particular attention to the circulation of power (Stevenson and Cutcliffe 2006: 715). I adopt Foucault's (1977) view of the genealogical project as a 'history of the present', and

there has not been scope in my analysis to undertake a detailed longitudinal mapping of change. However, I have tried to indicate, where possible, how and why key themes and perspectives have shifted.

Chapter 2 explores the issue of sexual violence, focusing in particular on the contemporary anti-victim orthodoxy in academia and its relationship with neoliberal rationalities, and how this is set against the rather problematic alliance of radical feminist activism and neoconservative projects of social control. In chapter 3, the power of neoconservative discourse is again examined, particularly in terms of how the centring of the victimized 'Muslim woman' within neo-imperial projects has led to a focus on agency and resistance in progressive political and intellectual circles. These two chapters look at fields which are characterized by contestation and dispute: in contrast, chapters 4 and 5 tackle areas where there is a more definite orthodoxy at play. Chapter 4 examines the contemporary sex-radical framework which dominates debates about the sex industry, exploring commonalities with neoliberalism in its emphasis on identity, empowerment and choice. In chapter 5, the discussion tackles the 'natural' birth and breastfeeding movements which have emerged in many western countries, asking questions about how these have coincided with neoliberal and neoconservative agendas, sometimes in dubious ways. Throughout, common themes and ideas are highlighted and related back to my overarching conceptual framework. Bringing all these different issues together, an endeavour which has not been attempted before, yields invaluable insights about the nature of contemporary gender politics.

None of the areas covered in this book is neutral – they are all politically and morally constructed. Furthermore, many of them are characterized by 'bad science' residing in frequent claims and counterclaims which are often partial but which also invariably purport to be conclusive. Examining these fields discursively involves an attempt to deconstruct some of the more common or dominant claims and contextualize them more broadly. Such an analysis will not produce the 'truth' about whether practices of veiling and/or professions in the sex industry are essentially

oppressive or essentially empowering, whether Julian Assange has committed sex crimes or whether breast is really best. Indeed, Shiner (1982) terms Foucault's genealogical method an 'anti-method' for precisely these reasons: because the search for truth and origins is ultimately destined to fail, and because there is no objective, apolitical method which can help it succeed. Instead, my book may give insights into the web of discourses and power relations which constitutes the contemporary politics of the body. I am aware that this may be seen as a 'truth-telling' by some, and that the sources from which I have gathered my data – policy, politics, popular culture and the media in the United Kingdom and other western countries – are circumscribed. The discussions I examine will not touch everyone in the West and will be limited in their impact in broader contexts, although policies emanating from these arenas may have considerable international reach. I also realize that, in exploring major frameworks and orthodoxies, there will be many discourses I have missed or perhaps flattened out, as I am sketching with a fairly broad brush. Finally, I should check my own privilege at the outset, as a white, western, able-bodied and cisgendered woman married to a man, living a fairly conventional middle-class lifestyle. The analysis I present here, then, cannot be exhaustive or irrefutable: however, the book should be seen as an interpretation of major contemporary debates which may be of interest and provide food for thought.

# 1

## *Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism: Framing the Politics of the Body*

This book takes the dominant contemporary economic and political rationalities of neoliberalism and neoconservatism as its primary conceptual resource in analysing themes common to a number of different western debates about women's bodies. While by no means the only discourses in play, these two have achieved enormous political, social and cultural power, to the extent that other perspectives and movements have found themselves on the defensive (Brown 2006), and this can be observed in all the fields explored here. My broad approach to investigating this dynamic can be characterized as a *political sociology of the body*, both associating with and differentiating itself from the sociological and political modes. The *sociology of the body* can loosely be described as a sub-discipline concerned with how the body is both material and socially/politically constructed (Turner 1984; Shilling 1993). It covers themes around embodiment, experience, identity, representation and power, and explores how these are shaped by discourse and social structure and refracted by categories such as class, gender, 'race', sexual orientation, (dis)ability and age. In contrast, the *politics of the body* can be understood as the substance and detail of debates about key issues such as the ones covered

in this book, as well as others such as abortion, cosmetic surgery, disability and disordered eating. These are often contentious and characterized by claims, counterclaims and controversies, featuring individuals and groups of seemingly diametrically opposed political persuasions. Feminism is regularly implicated or involved, since such debates often pivot around women's bodies (Weitz 1998), even when focused on issues which also affect men.

Working alongside and drawing much from both these modes of engagement, the political sociological analysis developed in this book asks questions about how contemporary discussions of issues to do with women's bodies reflect and construct how we conceptualize embodiment. It also, crucially, attempts to contextualize controversial political debates within a sociological frame. This involves situating them within the social, political, economic and cultural spheres and structures of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, as well as exploring the social construction of the discursive fields themselves. The latter implies a commitment to uncovering whose are the dominant voices and how this reflects and perpetuates existing inequalities based on social categories such as gender, 'race' and social class. Furthermore, it raises questions about how the debates themselves might reflect the concerns of the individuals and groups who predominate within them, highlighting important silences and wondering about the potential effects of taking other perspectives into account. In this endeavour, which might be called genealogical (Foucault 1977), I make use of a number of key concepts and theoretical frameworks, which allow me to conceptualize the broad structural and political context of neoliberalism and neoconservatism and provide useful tools for a more intersectional analysis.

## Neoliberalism and neoconservatism: the unholy alliance

First of all, my political sociology of the body is framed by the structures and discourses of neoliberal capitalism. In particular, the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalist production has

intersected with and informed processes of embodiment in a number of important ways. Fordism, the system of industrial mass production which employed large-scale, low-cost physical/manual labour, used detailed technical divisions of tasks along a moving assembly line (Pietrykowski 1994: 68; Rayner and Easthope 2001; Smith 2008: 180). The Fordist market was dominated by a small number of major producers, resulting in little consumer choice (Rayner and Easthope 2001). In contrast, in a post-Fordist era we have seen an explosion of market-based choices which has come to inform the social construction of identities, as well as the engagements of individuals and groups with the political sphere. The industrial production of goods in the West has made way for a 'post-industrial' economy based on services and knowledge (Nettleton 2006: 221). Labour has become more flexible and decentralized and many functions have been outsourced, leading to an international societal division of production which has exacerbated existing inequalities (Waters 1995). There is also a greater emphasis on product differentiation by marketing, packaging and design and the targeting of consumers according to lifestyle, taste and culture. The global economy is now dominated by multinational companies, which have a degree of autonomy from nation-state control, and financial markets which have been a product of the communications revolution (Hall 1988).

The growth of service- and knowledge-based industries has had important effects on the social structure and the formation of identities, contributing to the decline of the Fordist (white, male) manual working class and the 'feminization' of the workforce. Theories of an attendant 'crisis of masculinity' (Shilling 1993: 114–15; Gill, Henwood and McLean 2005: 39) have intersected with the neoconservative backlash against feminism to threaten many gains for women's rights and construct a contemporary gender politics which often appears fraught. In general terms, it is now thought that identity no longer derives automatically from one's position in the matrix of production, leading to a greater emphasis on the body which is shaped to a great extent by consumer culture (Giddens 1991; Bauman 1992). The new service industries also engage the body in different ways, for instance the



'emotion work' which requires employees to manage their feelings, body language and expressions in accordance with their employer's requirements, in order to produce the desired emotional state in customers (Hochschild 1983). Some of the new service industries also have particular physical requirements, usually for women employees (Shilling 1993; Davies 2011).

Although capitalism is not a monolith (Duggan 2003), it can be said that in western neoliberal economies the body has become a symbol of value and identity which is largely performed and developed via the purchase of products (Shilling 1993; Carolan 2005). The drive to consume in order to both express and 'add value' to oneself is a key aspect of contemporary consumer culture, which feeds markets that rely upon idealized representations of the body and the elevation of particular prestigious bodily forms through advertising (Shilling 1993: 129). In a context in which consumption is primarily about 'symbolic value' rather than 'use value' (Rayner and Easthope 2001: 170–1), focused on cultural assets as opposed to merely material ones (Savage et al. 1992: 112), we have seen among the privileged a dramatic growth in spending on beauty, fitness and fashion, a rise in alternative health practices and in more extreme 'body projects' (Shilling 1993: 112) such as cosmetic surgeries. These new moralities and practices of consumption are central to neoliberal value systems and can be seen informing many of the debates in this book, evident for instance in prescribed bodily practices which become central to profitable markets, rapidly mainstreaming industries focused on the consumption of sexualized bodies, and most importantly contemporary conceptualizations of 'choice' which have been shaped in newly economic directions.

In a post-Fordist context, the chief contemporary economic and political lexicon in the West is regarded by many as constituted by a coalition between neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities. Neoliberalism has become hegemonic as a system of political and economic organization, while neoconservatism infuses our popular morality and underpins regulatory projects both domestically and overseas (Brown 1995, 2006; Harvey 2005; Fraser 2009). Neoliberalism, which developed first in the United States and then