

Leela Fernandes (editor)

Feminists Rethink the Neoliberal State: Inequality, Exclusion, and Change

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Feminists Rethink the Neoliberal State is a collection of essays by feminist scholars from a variety of social-scientific fields that originated at a conference at the University of Michigan in 2014. Its title seems to promise a critical analysis of the neoliberal state from the perspective of feminist theory and politics, but its value lies more in the detailed case studies of particular configurations of state power in specific contexts and countries.

In the first chapter, editor Leela Fernandes offers a substantive argument as well as an overview of the whole book, but her argument raises more questions than it answers. Titled "Conceptualizing the Post-Liberalization State," this chapter deviates from the book's title and instead introduces a new term: post-liberalization. Fernandes's language choice derives from the frustration she expresses with the expansive and imprecise use of "neoliberalism" in contemporary academic discourse (22). However, "post-liberalization" is also not clearly defined; she presumes that her readers know what the "liberalization state" is, and therefore will recognize post-liberalization as a subsequent stage.

Fernandes contends that extant scholarship on "the neoliberal state" tends to make three errors. First, scholars assume that the neoliberal state is a "state in retreat" (3), inasmuch as neoliberal ideology promotes privatization of state services and encourages limits on regulation and state intervention in the economy. Second, scholars treat the neoliberal state as the effect of neoliberalism, effectively dehistoricizing the state, instead of situating analysis of the state under neoliberalism in terms of its historical roots, which leads them to overlook how "the neoliberal state coexists with older models of the developmental state" (6). Third, scholars treat neoliberalism as a monolithic phenomenon, as all-powerful and irresistible, and with "uniform effects" (6).

She proposes this collection of essays as one attempt to complicate accounts of the neoliberal state: to pluralize our understanding of how different, historically specific states function under neoliberalism, to trouble the view that the state is in retreat by noting how neoliberal states have grown or how subjects feel the effects of governmentality beyond the state, and to undermine the

presumption that neoliberalism functions everywhere in the same way. Her review of the literature curiously overlooks the significant contribution of Michel Foucault to theorizing neoliberalism; all of these are points he made decades ago that continue to influence many scholars, including some in this volume.

It may come as some surprise that I have not yet mentioned the connection to feminism, except that Fernandes herself does not do so until page 17. Rather than being integrated into the framing argument she makes for the book, feminism appears here as incidental to the collection, a point to which I will return later.

In chapter 2, "What's in a Word?," Nancy A. Naples proposes to analyze the rhetoric of "austerity," comparing its use in Europe and the United States in order to trace the "material effects of austerity discourse as it shapes government policies, increasing inequality, and gendered experiences" (34). Her concern is that the use of the language of austerity (and prior to it, "structural adjustment") obscures the effects of austerity policies on the everyday lives of ordinary people. It's not at all clear that this is a consequence of using the language of austerity: the essay does not connect austerity discourse clearly to the framing of problems in terms that obscure austerity policies' effects.

Ujju Aggarwal offers an insightful case study of neoliberal school-choice policies in New York City in chapter 3, "After Rights." She performs an ethnography of a group of low-income mothers of color navigating school choice, who discover that only certain children are desired by the relatively privileged school in their district. Rather than recruiting low-income or minority students as such, the school is interested in recruiting only those students who have something to offer to its affluent, predominantly white, student base: namely, Spanish skills that will enable the children of the affluent to acquire Spanish more readily. Aggarwal concludes that "choice policies cultivate a consumer citizenship within the realm of the public that anticipates inequality, produces margins, and ensures the protection of *whiteness as property*, or the protection of institutionalized and historically accumulated assets tied to status and privilege" (94).

In chapter 4, "The Production of Silence," Lamia Karim details how the development of "a historically specific relationship between the state, donors, and NGOs" in Bangladesh has produced a situation in which NGOs are often run by feminists, yet these same feminists are silent on criticisms of neoliberalism (106). She argues that these feminists remain silent because of a combination of donor preferences, state repression, and concern about criticizing the nexus of power and wealth. Yet some of this silencing may simply be a consequence of ideological differences between feminists. She notes that the feminist leaders of NGOs "would like to see Bangladesh as a functional democracy similar to northern European countries with certain rights and guarantees for women," whereas garment-industry union leaders want a larger feminist critique of the neoliberal market (123). Perhaps these feminist NGO leaders are simply liberal feminists who do not have a critique of neoliberalism? Karim points to some voices emerging in activism and academia in Bangladesh that offer a broader critique of neoliberalism from a feminist point of view, which suggests that such voices do exist, but they are not getting much uptake.

Dolly Daftary, in chapter 5, "An Improvising State," offers a fascinating and detailed case study of the "devolution of governance" in one region of India (Gujarat) in the late 2000s (137). Daftary explains that "[w]omen's employment in the state is expanding" in development-related fields, but at the same time this work is precarious, "with neoliberalism reproducing patterns of gender inequality" (140). Women are hired into jobs requiring higher credentials than those of their male counterparts, but that are largely segregated into microcredit finance, where work is comparatively contingent, contractual, and low-paid. This reproduces inequalities between men and women even as women appear to be increasingly integrated into the paid labor economy. Moreover, Daftary traces how this precarious work also entails increased "neoliberal governmentality": "workers are increasingly made to self-supervise" and document various aspects of their work (147). The devolution of power to the locality has also meant a re-entrenchment of traditional, patriarchal forms of male leadership in which "[w]omen's access to microcredit was contingent on their networks with male lineage leaders, and on patriarchal notions of citizenship rooted in rules of male land inheritance and village exogamy" (151). As the neoliberal state withdraws from local governance, the power vacuum is likely to be filled by these traditional forms of patriarchal rule.

In chapter 6, "The Broken Windows of Rosa Ramos," Christina Heatherton traces the history of "broken windows policing" in the US, claiming that it "has emerged as the social regulating mechanism used by cities and local states to discipline bodies, refashion public space, and render cities suitable for regimes of neoliberal capital accumulation" (168). Broken-windows policing authorizes pre-emptive police interventions to prevent neighborhoods from decline, yet in practice, as Heatherton points out, this leads to precisely the kind of decline that the policies are meant to prevent, initiated by the overregulation of poor and minority populations. She theorizes the concept of "imminent violability" as the particular condition of vulnerability experienced by people disciplined by broken windows policing, who come to expect violations in the name of security. She calls this concept feminist because it "link[s] racism, capital accumulation, and the increasingly commonplace vulnerability to state violence most keenly experienced by poor and working-class communities of color across the United States and beyond" (169).

Amy Lind turns in chapter 7, "After Neoliberalism?" to what she characterizes as Ecuador's "post-neoliberal experiment" with transforming the heteronormative family over the past two decades (196). This essay is replete with historical details, but it is difficult to follow the timeline. At times, she is critical of how LGBTI rights have been taken up in Ecuador, suggesting that they are accepted inasmuch as they reinforce existing norms: "LGBTI individuals are linked to progress, whiteness, urban centers, and class respectability" (201). Yet she also identifies radical potential in the concept of *buen vivir* articulated in the 2007 constitution, which "resignifies the family, shifting from a singular notion of the family rooted in a legal definition of biological kinship or sanguine relations to one based on a notion of *la familia diversa*, the family in its diverse forms, rooted in 'alternative logics' to that of traditional kinship" (205). Ecuadorean activists have been torn between embracing this radical potential and criticizing President Rafael Correa's embrace of conservative, Catholic heteronormativity. Lind's unsurprising conclusion is that "post-neoliberal forms of governance do not necessarily lead to more progressive views on reproductive and sexual rights" (214).

In the final chapter, Fernandes briefly reviews the collection, claiming again that the essays form a coherent whole. "The essays in this volume craft a feminist materialist analytic that provide [sic] an avenue for a deeper understanding of the political, social, and economic effects of policies associated with neoliberalism" (221). She claims that this "feminist materialist analytic" involves a combination of perspectives: 1) intersectional analysis, 2) feminist analysis of women, gender, and sexuality; and 3) transnational analysis (222). These might be said to be features of the essays taken as a whole, but these three perspectives are not consistently at play in each of the pieces.

Feminism does not have one single meaning or methodology. It is always challenging to define feminism precisely, and this problem is compounded in a volume like this one containing contributions from many different academic fields.

Nonetheless, if there is a uniting feminist thread in this book, it is perhaps that all the authors would identify themselves as feminists. In some essays, feminist theory, feminist activists, or women play a significant role. In others, sections on women or feminism seem to be tacked on as an afterthought, or intersectional analysis (with little attention to gender or sexuality) functions as a stand-in for feminism. The book could have just as accurately been titled *Women Rethink the Neoliberal State*, as the role that feminism plays in the book overall is rather superficial. Scholars of feminist theory and politics will find in this collection some very interesting case studies. But a feminist theory of the neoliberal state? That book has yet to be written.