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Alison Phipps, "The Politics of the Body. Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age". Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, 207 pp.

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Book Review

Alison Phipps, “The Politics of the Body. Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age”. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, 207 pp.

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Alison Phipps, Director of Gender Studies at the University of Sussex, in this book “uses” a variety case studies and primary and secondary data to analyse sociologically four contemporary western controversial debates on women’s bodies “politics”: sexual violence (and celebrities), concentrating on the contemporary anti-victim orthodoxy in academia and its relationship with neoliberalism rationalities to underline a “problematic alliance of radical feminism activism and neoconservative projects of social control” [p. 5]; gender and Islam focusing in particular on power of neoconservative discourse about “victim” Vs. “agency” in the neo-liberal one; sex work in the debate about the sex industry and, finally, childbirth and breastfeeding and the consensus about “natural” as new regime of truth.

The author takes feminism as “theoretical and political standpoint” [p. 17] but the real intent of the book is to question the feminisms on these four issues “in relation to the mainstream and popular political discourse and the framework of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in particular” [p. 3] to show how the contemporary “alliance” between those two “neo” has shaped a variety of issues in the politics of the women’s body [p. 19]. For the author this is a challenge to “emergent retro-sexism” [p. 3] on both the right and left wing of contemporary politics, as well as what Phipps views as “problematic developments” within feminism itself. Phipps acknowledges how mainstream feminism is itself a politics of privilege and explores how “it has been used [and misused]” in all these controversial debates.

In the first chapter, *Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism: Framing the Politics of the Body* [pp. 7-19], Phipps outlines her theoretical positioning about women’s bodies and discourses of neoliberalism and neoconservatism with a focus on the Other that, in our opinion, would have deserved a deeper historical study on the different waves of feminism.

In the second chapter, *Sexual Violence and the Politics of Victimhood* [pp. 20-48], the author discusses the (ab)use in the cases of the “celebrities” Julian Assange, Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Roman Polanski to explore the contemporary field of sexual politics between a right-wing backlash against feminism and a left-wing ambivalence towards feminist sexual violence politics. The author’s thesis according to which the neoliberal discourse has moved away from a victim-focused agenda seems a bit too general considering instead what today, on some issues, the neoliberal discourse on the body of women has increasingly been focusing on a vision and a policy of victimization. In fact “the experience of sexual violence victimization has been co-opted by the Right in such dubious ways that on the Left it has become risky to emphasize it” [p. 48].

In the third chapter, *Gender and Islam in a Neoconservative World* [pp. 49-76], Phipps discusses the contemporary debate around Islam, Muslim women and the construction of Muslim women’s bodies as the “bodies of the Other.” While on the Right the dominant policy and mainstream public opinion is an Orientalist construction of

Muslim women as passive “cultural” victims, according with the vision that the veil (with forced marriage, honor killings and female genital modifications) is a symbol of an oppressive patriarchal culture [p. 63]; on the Left (particularly in academia and in the left-wing activism) the focus about Muslim women is on the agency and resistance to celebrate the “cultural difference” as well as against western capitalist sexualized femininity. These positions, apparently opposed, are much closer than they seem because they are characterized by the assumption of “culture” like “essence”: tradition/oppression/no choice Vs. tradition/authenticity/choice. On this issue the author questions feminism and the (ambiguous) politics of “voices” that are emerged in personal narratives used as the main evidence of cultural oppression or, on the other hand, agency and empowerment. The theme of oppression and “rational choice” and essentialism comes back in the chapter on sex work, *The Commodified Politics of the Sex Industry* [pp. 76-101], where Phipps discusses the current dominant sex-radical perspective on the sex industry and where she analyses how the third wave of feminism and the postmodernism, which underpin contemporary sex radicalism, become problematic when they marry the idea of neoliberal rationalities and the embodiment of privilege. In this perspective, people with economic and cultural resources are more likely to be able to choose to participate in sex work and also dominate the “sex work glitterati” [p. 80], who are the principal representatives on the industry in academia, politic, activism and popular culture: in the end, Phipps writes “neither the figure of the victim nor that of the ‘happy hooker’ may be representative one, and sex workers should not need to be happy, empowered or to have chosen their profession on order to be able to demand rights and respect” [p. 101].

This idea of privilege is also to the base of Chapter five, that focuses on the orthodoxy on natural childbirth and breastfeeding and the rhetoric about “natural,” “normal,” “choice,” “informed choice”, etc.: “the new intensive motherhood dovetails well with both neoconservative gender traditionalism and neoliberal politics of personal responsibility” [p. 130]. Here Phipps rightly criticizes the naïve primitivism such as the consensus on “normal birth” and “breast is best” which dominates the reproductive “politic” arena and its “strong connections with neoconservative and neoliberal rationalities” [p. 130].

This book is a useful tool, specially for the students and junior researchers, even if sometimes can be “peremptory” because virtually each chapter deserves a monograph of its own. In effect, the author analyses some fundamental issues of today’s debate on the politics of the women’s bodies, which cross the borders of United Kingdom. The provocative style chosen by the author makes reading enjoyable especially when Alison Phipps challenges the feminisms on the field of rhetoric, but more importantly, policies that make ambiguous some positioning and where the line between neoliberalism and neoconservatism becomes, really too much, blurred.

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