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Neoliberal feminism as political ideology: revitalizing the study of feminist political ideologies

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ABSTRACT

The emerging literature on neoliberal feminism appears to signal the revitalization of the study of feminist ideologies, suspended since the mid-1980s. However, it is argued here that scholars tend to conceptualize neoliberal feminism in a way that inhibits ideological analysis, as exemplified in Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism*. They take classifications of feminist political ideologies from the 1980s as representative of the only true feminisms, and thus view neoliberal feminism as a perversion, rather than an outgrowth, of earlier feminisms. This account of the emergence of neoliberal feminism is both historically inaccurate and politically problematic: it positions feminists as passive in the face of an overpowering neoliberal agency, and limits feminists' capacity to imagine themselves as agents of political and ideological change. Building on Michael Freeden's work on political ideologies, an alternative account of neoliberal feminism is offered, one that locates feminist agency in the production of new feminist ideologies.

The end of feminist ideology studies?

While throughout the 1970s, feminists inside and outside of the academy attempted to identify and classify different feminist political ideologies, enthusiasm for such work appears to have waned in the mid-1980s. Consequently, both feminist scholarship and the literature on political ideologies are hobbled by outdated categories that reflect the state of feminist political thought some thirty years ago, as if feminist ideology had since ceased evolving into new formations.

Perhaps the first attempt to develop a typology of feminist political ideologies was Elizabeth Diggs's 1970 essay, 'What is the women's movement?'[1] In this brief article, Diggs distinguished between three 'main political tendencies' of feminism expressed in movement activism in the United States at the time: liberal, radical (or what she preferred to call 'cultural') and socialist.[2] Although she did not invoke the language of political ideology to describe these three 'tendencies,' Diggs offered an analysis of their features that today we could recognize as an account of distinct ideologies. She carefully demarcated how the three political tendencies, while all feminist, differed from one another along five axes:

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(1) the enemy or 'source of women's oppression,' (2) the 'political objectives' or form of government supported by the view, (3) the 'strategy and tactics' employed, (4) the group of persons 'primarily appealed to' and (5) the 'doctrine and spokeswomen that represent the political perspective.'[3]

Subsequent feminist authors further developed and refined these categories and the analysis of their distinctive ideological features, most notably Alison Jaggar in *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*.[4] These feminists variously added to the list anarchist feminism, separatist feminism, conservative feminism, libertarian feminism, ecofeminism and others.[5] However, the interest in maintaining a comprehensive typology of feminist political ideologies seems more or less to have come to an end in the mid-1980s, leaving feminists thirty years later working with the same categories established long ago by the likes of Diggs and Jaggar. Feminism as a family of political ideologies, it would seem, had fully developed all of its possible configurations somewhere around 1985.

Curiously, though, while feminists seem to have stopped adding new *political ideologies* to their typologies of feminism, they never stopped classifying different kinds of feminisms. Other additions to the list of feminisms make reference to academic or theoretical schools of thought (e.g. postmodern feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, intersectional feminism); or more descriptively to *who* is doing the feminism in question (e.g. Postcolonial feminism, Third World feminism, black feminism, queer or lesbian feminism); or in some cases to both simultaneously (as in the mysterious category of French feminism). Yet another way of classifying feminisms refers to *when* the feminism is being done: e.g. millennial feminism, Third Wave and Fourth Wave feminisms, post-feminism – although feminist scholars have been hard-pressed to identify any particular views shared by all of those who are classified by the same temporal label.[6] While these different forms of classifying feminism have their merit, none of them identify political ideologies – that is, clusters of ideas about politics that motivate particular forms of political action, and that have a broader appeal beyond academia. Indeed, many of these newer categories of feminism are used to distinguish families of academic theorizing about feminism, which need not reflect any corresponding ideology manifest beyond the rarified world of academic scholarship.

Feminist scholarship has thus shifted away from this earlier interest in analysing different feminist political ideologies, while scholars of political ideologies, rather than filling in this gap, themselves have relied heavily on the pre-1985 typologies in order to characterize feminisms.[7] And where the earlier typologies analysed feminist politics and the writings of feminist activists in order to categorize political ideologies, later classifications often entail a shift from the streets to the academy.[8] Rather than looking to feminist politics to categorize new feminisms, scholars have tended to look inwards at their own theoretical disagreements for material. Consequently, scholars interested in feminist political ideology have fallen out of the habits of examining political actions, political rhetoric and political organizing for insight into whether and how new feminisms are emerging. Indeed, when scholars do examine contemporary feminist politics, rather than developing new categories of ideology to describe new patterns of thinking, they often describe contemporary activism merely in terms of its relationship to the already existing categories of liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism and so forth. That is, scholars of feminism lack both the skills to recognize new ideologies and the conceptual freedom to develop a new vocabulary with which to describe them.

In this context, the burgeoning scholarship on 'neoliberal feminism' might appear to signal a revival of interest in feminist ideology studies.[9] The label *neoliberal* feminism fits the model of many earlier typologies, which qualified each type of feminism with the name of another political ideology. So where liberal feminism is a feminism inflected by liberal political ideology, we might expect that neoliberal feminism would be a feminism inflected by neoliberal ideology.[10] Moreover, unlike much of the classificatory work of the past three decades, discussions of neoliberal feminism do not locate it primarily in academic or theoretical texts, but rather in popular culture and popular feminist discourse. Yet since we have not witnessed a self-described neoliberal feminist manifesto, or a group self-designated as neoliberal feminist, scholars must necessarily engage in interpretive analysis when they claim that a set of cultural and political phenomena are evidence of something they call neoliberal feminism. Consequently, we have many reasons to expect that scholarly work on neoliberal feminism will look like an interpretive analysis of a political ideology that takes political discourse and political action as its subject matter, much as we can find in Diggs's or Jaggar's analysis of feminisms, or in Michael Freeden's work.

However, on closer examination, this scholarship does not actually involve ideological analysis. This new literature tends to treat neoliberal feminism not as a newly emergent variant of feminist political ideology, but rather as an impostor. Indeed, the central presumption (if not the explicit claim) of much of this literature is that 'neoliberal feminism' is a perversion and cooptation of feminism to serve the interests of an amorphous agent called 'neoliberalism.'[11] The analysis of neoliberal feminism is thus premised on the notion that it is not *really* a feminism at all. It is not within the range of ideas that we can permissibly interpret as feminisms, not because it is sufficiently different from other feminisms that it is a distinct ideological formation, but rather because it deceptively *appears* to be a version of feminism, when it is actually anti-feminist. We might understand this as a claim that neoliberal feminism *is* an ideology, but in the Marxist sense: it obscures and deflects our attention away from true feminism. Consequently, this new literature on neoliberal feminism does not represent a revitalization of the study of feminist political ideologies, but its opposite: it consolidates the already existing categories of feminist political ideologies as the only true feminisms, such that neoliberal feminism is properly seen as a perversion of these true feminisms, rather than a development from them.

In the following section, I critically analyse Nancy Fraser's influential work on neoliberal feminism, which typifies and lays bare the problematic features of the emerging scholarship on the topic. Through a reading of her recent *Fortunes of Feminism*, I show how she conceptualizes neoliberal feminism as an uncanny impostor, the product of neoliberalism's cynical cooptation of true feminism. This narrative frame inhibits analysing neoliberal feminism as an emergent feminist political ideology. Yet more than just conceptually problematic, Fraser's narrative is politically troubling: she represents feminists as passive and helpless in the face of the seemingly irresistible and omnipotent force of neoliberalism. The dominant account of neoliberal feminism exemplified by her work is thus one that limits feminist capacity to imagine political alternatives.

I then turn to ideology studies, and Freeden's work in particular, in order to sketch out a critical analysis of neoliberal feminism understood as a political ideology. I argue that this interpretation of neoliberal feminism is conceptually superior to Fraser's, but more importantly it is politically superior in that it opens up space for feminist political imagination. The revitalization of the study of contemporary feminist political ideologies that I call for in this

essay is thus not only an intellectual project of encouraging scholars to study ever-evolving feminist ideas, but also importantly a political project that uses ideology analysis in order to enable our capacities for collective action.

The attack of the blob: Fraser on neoliberal feminism

Fraser's analysis of neoliberal feminism is typical of much recent work on neoliberalism, in that she leaves neoliberalism relatively undertheorized and undefined, and yet attributes to it extraordinary powers. Neoliberalism functions like the Blob, absorbing every competing ideology in its path, and contorting them so as to suit its own purposes.[12] Fraser recounts the past thirty-odd years of feminist history in the US as a period in which 'neoliberalizing forces succeeded … in defusing the more radical currents of second-wave feminism.'[13] With the resuscitation of free-market ideologies in the 1980s, 'neoliberalism' (the scarequotes are Fraser's) undercut feminist – and especially socialist feminist – attempts at change. She explains, 'Feminist movements that had earlier taken the welfare state as their point of departure, seeking to extend its egalitarian ethos from class to gender, now found the ground cut out from under their feet.'[14] This led feminists to shift their political focus from questions of redistribution to questions of recognition, a shift that helped to fuel feminism's 'dangerous liaison' with neoliberalism.[15]

Fraser describes feminism as an unknowing accomplice to neoliberalism: 'second-wave feminism has unwittingly provided a key ingredient of the new spirit of neoliberalism,' namely, a set of ideals that 'have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions of a just society.'[16] Feminism is passive in this history: feminist ideas 'were conscripted' in a 'selective enlistment.' Neoliberalism, by contrast, is active: it 'dramatically changed the terrain on which feminism operated' by 'resignify[ing] feminist ideals.'[17] Feminists, on Fraser's account, were reduced to mute bystanders as their ideas were selectively reworked to serve neoliberalism's nefarious purposes. Feminists 'watched the neoliberal onslaught instrumentalize our best ideas.'[18] During the welfare reform debates of the 1990s in the US, 'feminists *watched helplessly* as Bill Clinton triangulated their nuanced critique of a sexist and stigmatizing system of poor relief into a plan to "end welfare as we know it."'[19]

The result of neoliberalism's resignification of feminist ideas is that feminism is now accompanied by 'an uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow': neoliberal feminism.[20] Feminists now have to contend with the reality that their ideas do not always signify as they would wish, because neoliberalism has given them new meanings that operate to support policies and practices that are decidedly nonfeminist. But – even though feminism unintentionally supplied the material from which neoliberalism formed this uncanny double – feminists themselves, she assures us, are not 'to blame for the triumph of neoliberalism.'[21]

Setting aside the question of the historical accuracy of Fraser's narrative, how does this narrative frame our understanding of the relationship between feminism and neoliberalism? It positions feminism as a victim of the actions of 'neoliberalism.'[22] Feminism is relegated to the sidelines, watching others like Bill Clinton take action, but unable to act itself. And, while feminism provided ideas that have supported the rise of neoliberalism, and while feminism has been 'conscripted' in its service, feminism is not responsible for anything done by its uncanny double, neoliberal feminism. Feminism's hands are clean.

I am troubled by this narrative about the origins of neoliberal feminism for several reasons. First, it sets up a dichotomy between feminism (an originary, pure feminism) and its uncanny double, neoliberal feminism (the corrupted, co-opted version that is not truly feminist). This narrative obscures the complexity of relationships between feminism and neoliberalism, and renders unintelligible any attempt to expose how feminists and feminist ideologies have enabled, invited and accelerated the rise of neoliberal feminism. This is a compelling frame, to be sure, because it allows us to recognize a connection between 'feminism' and 'neoliberal feminism' – but without having to take any responsibility for the latter.

Second, Fraser's narrative characterizes neoliberalism as a kind of all-powerful bogeyman, capable of taming feminism, yet somehow smart enough to pick out only those elements of feminism's ideas that can be resignified for its own purposes, without accidentally importing anything that might subvert them. That neoliberalism is awfully cunning! By contrast, feminists are reduced in this narrative to the role of victims, incapable of action (and indeed incapable of subversion, of turning the uncanny double against neoliberalism). This is a politically demoralizing and demobilizing frame: feminism is easily rendered mute by the neoliberal behemoth. Fraser gives us no resources to conceptualize what it would mean for feminists to resist this cooptation: indeed, how can we resist a force so totalizing, so clever, so amorphous as neoliberalism?[23] Her narrative recounts the recent history of feminism as one marked by political passivity, and so makes it hard to envision what feminist agency might look like.

Fraser is presuming a particular view of what political ideologies are, how they emerge, and how they function, that – while appealing – is ultimately politically paralyzing. In order to move beyond the predominant view of neoliberal feminism as an illegitimate and irresistible cooptation of 'real feminism,' we must recognize and challenge the assumptions about political ideology that are implicit in this view. Note first that Fraser treats ideologies as if they have distinct identities that are clearly identifiable to the careful observer. Neoliberalism and feminism are objectively different from one another; while neoliberalism may appear in a feminist guise, it is only ever a 'shadowy double' of real feminism. Neoliberalism's cooptation of feminist ideals does not alter feminism's distinctive identity; it only makes it less readily apparent. Ideologies maintain their distinctive identities even when they encounter one another: their difference is preserved; they are not and cannot be transformed by the other.

Indeed, the distinctive identity of political ideologies on this view seems to be ahistorical and unchanging over time, irrespective of whether one ideology comes into contact with another.[24] Feminism's true identity, as Fraser presents it, has been consistent for decades. As I put it at the outset of this essay, the categories that described the range of possible feminisms in the 1970s and 80s are the only categories we need: all 'real' feminism is already captured by these classifications. Feminism has not shifted or developed from what it once was; the only shift is that neoliberalism now has produced an impostor that poses as a kind of feminism, but is not truly one. This constancy is characteristic of neoliberalism as well, which is presented in Fraser's writing as an ahistorical ideology: while it emerges at a particular moment in history, once it has emerged, neoliberalism seems to persist over time as self-same and unchanging.

Fraser treats ideologies not only as having a single, consistent identity over time, but also as if they are agents, capable of action (and capable of inaction). She presents neoliberalism as wholly agentic, and feminism as wholly passive. The hegemony of neoliberalism is thus

the result of its ability to co-opt other ideologies, like feminism, and twist them to suit its own purposes.

Taken together, these three assumptions about ideologies – that they have a clear identity, one which persists over time, and that they are agents establishing (or failing to establish) ideological hegemony – produce political paralysis. There is no place in this account of ideology for human agency; instead, people find themselves in a world characterized by fixed sets of ideas that compete with one another for dominance. Fraser's description of neoliberal feminism is not neutral in its effects, but on the contrary can function to demobilize feminists as agents in reconfiguring neoliberal ideologies. Our capacity for political imagination – for seeing ourselves as political agents capable of creating change – is dependent on how we see the political world, and how we understand ourselves as agents or as victims within that world. To move beyond her analysis and towards an understanding of neoliberal feminism that affords feminists a role as agents in resisting and undermining its seeming hegemonic force, we require a different conception of political ideology. In the following section, I turn to Freeden's work on political ideology, although I am not completely faithful to it, in order to develop a conception of ideologies that is both more empirically plausible and more politically enabling, insofar as it allows room for feminists to view themselves as agents in interpreting, developing and resisting ideologies.

Towards understanding neoliberal feminism as a political ideology

How we conceptualize political ideology has political effects. Our beliefs about ideologies – whether they are merely assumed and left inarticulate, or whether they are meticulously theorized – have consequences for how we think about ourselves as political actors, and for whether we have the freedom to imagine alternative ways of configuring our political ideas. For example, if we believe that 'feminism' must refer to an unchanging set of beliefs, and that the possible permutations of feminist ideology are fully captured by categories established decades ago, then as scholars we will not look for new variations on feminist ideology, and as political actors we may become dogmatic: insisting that others conform to a narrow range of 'true' feminisms, and unwilling to entertain new ideas. Or if we believe that neoliberalism is a discrete and powerful agent, capable of absorbing and perverting other ideologies like feminism, then we may find it difficult to imagine how as political actors we might be capable of resisting and counteracting an amorphous set of ideas. The beliefs that ideologies have a distinctive and unchanging identity, independent of the humans who subscribe to them; that ideologies are fixed and unchanging; and that ideologies have agency and exert power in the world – all of these are *anti-political* beliefs about ideology, insofar as they limit our capacity for political imagination and political action.[25]

We can think about ideologies in a way that eclipses the role of individual agency, or we can think about them in a way that highlights the role of human action in creating, sustaining, displacing and changing dominant ideologies – thus enabling our capacity to imagine ourselves as political actors who have the ability to alter the world in which we live. Freeden's theorization of political ideology can be helpful as a starting point for developing a more political view of ideology, but to see this in his work requires working both with and against his own purposes. Freeden call on scholars of political ideology to carefully distinguish their task – interpreting and analysing ideologies – from the task of political judgement. As he puts it, 'The aim of the student of ideologies is to reveal and decode patterns of thinking

rather than to argue with, promote, defend, or reject substantive ethical and intellectual positions.'[26] The study of political ideology is thus for Freeden a practice that is neutral and non-partisan.[27] Yet it is also political in the sense that I have been developing here: even when eschewing partisanship, Freeden's approach to the study of political ideologies opens up space for political imagination.

Briefly, then, here are three crucial features of the theory of political ideology I adopt, derived in part from Freeden's work. First, *ideologies are interpretive constructs*.[28] It is improper to understand ideologies as agentic, as political actors capable of co-opting and perverting other ideologies. Rather, ideologies are the product of human activity. Human agents may create ideologies directly when they write and disseminate manifestoes, propaganda, and advertising aiming to articulate and spread a set of political ideas.[29] Yet human agents may also be said to create ideologies indirectly when as academics they analyse a variety of political phenomena, and offer an interpretation of how these phenomena express a particular ideology. It takes a human being like Fraser to look at phenomena in the world and isolate the features of something she could call 'neoliberal feminism.' Neoliberal feminism is not a discrete object in the world, waiting for a scholar to come along and identify it; rather, it must be brought into being as a concept through interpretive analysis. While neoliberal feminism, like other ideologies, is not a pure product of imagination – it has empirical, material, observable reality – the grouping together of empirical phenomena, and the assigning of meaning to this grouping are activities that require human agency.[30] That ideologies are interpretive constructs is perhaps more apparent in the case of ideologies like 'neoliberal feminism' that have no self-professed adherents, no manifestoes or party platforms – than it is in the case of an ideology like Marxism or liberalism, where we can point to organized political activity and central, defining texts. Yet even where we have canonical texts, it is still a matter of interpretation to read them, and to read them as expressing an ideology. The upshot here is that an ideology such as 'neoliberalism' cannot *do* anything. We are mistaken to say that neoliberalism has co-opted feminist ideas for its own purposes: neoliberalism can no more co-opt another ideology than it can have purposes. Instead, what we should say more precisely is where and how we observe human agency at work, whether with or without intentionality and conscious purpose, reframing feminist policies or rhetoric along neoliberal lines.

The second important feature of political ideologies I wish to highlight is that *ideologies are in flux*. 'All ideologies,' Freeden writes, 'because they are constructed from many texts—are in a continuous process of restatement.'[31] And while particular statements of an ideology may remain stable (for example, a party platform or a pivotal speech), the meaning and significance of the ideas expressed in a single text changes over time and in different contexts. This is in part due to the reality that ideologies arise and develop in the context of other ideologies; they do not exist in isolation from one another. Ideologies emerge through the interactions of multiple individuals, groups and other ideologies, and within shifting material and structural contexts. While one ideology may change more rapidly than another, no ideology is fixed in time. We should not be surprised to see that an emergent neoliberal ideology draws on features of already extant ideologies: liberalism, neoconservatism and, yes, feminism. We should also not be surprised to see that feminist ideology adapts and changes in response to the arrival of neoliberal ideology. That we can observe the features of a new ideology – neoliberal feminism – is not a sign of the perversion or cooptation of feminism, but of the interaction and evolution of political ideologies

over time. Indeed, even though we may be able to identify common patterns of thinking and action that we label 'neoliberal feminist' across context and time, we may also note that neoliberal feminism in the US may differ from neoliberal feminism in the UK; and that neoliberal feminism in 2017 may look different than neoliberal feminism in 2007 or 2027. This is true even of ideologies that we imagine to be hegemonic: their predominance does not make them immune to alteration.

Third, *the power (or even the perceived hegemony) of a political ideology arises from a multiplicity of factors*. If ideologies are not agents, then how can we explain how their logics can shape human thought and behaviour? How is it possible for neoliberalism to appear to be hegemonic, if not through its own actions? I contend that this happens in a variety of ways. First, ideologies may increase in power because of the direct use of agentic power to suppress or to promote certain ideas – whether through explicit shows of institutional force (such as violent suppression or legal prosecution), or through less overtly coercive means (such as rhetorical framing or advertising). Second, they may increase in power because of a lack of political imagination on the part of those persons who would wish to resist its power: that is, human agents may not be able to imagine alternatives to a dominant ideology, or at least may not be able to imagine viable alternatives, and so may falsely presume that the dominant ideology is irresistible or simply true. Third, the power or dominance of an ideology may be reinforced by structural or cultural factors. In the context of the US, for example, the long-standing and widespread appeal of a particularly American flavour of libertarianism underlies the appeal of neoliberal feminism.

Recognizing that the appeal of a particular ideology arises from a multiplicity of factors enables us to see ideologies as neither irresistible nor inevitable, but as contingent. If we can identify these kinds of factors that contribute to the power and perceived hegemony of a particular ideology, then any one of them could become the site of intentional political action by human agents who wish to resist the ideology's hold on a given group. Here, I take my cue from Ludwig Wittgenstein: our ideological views are not held in place by any one thing, which if cut away, would render the entire ideology unstable. Rather, successful and hegemonic ideologies are like Wittgenstein's thread: deriving its strength not because 'some one fibre runs through its whole length,' but through the 'overlapping of many fibres,' any one of which could be severed without compromising the integrity of the whole.[32] Therefore, if we want to resist a particular ideology's hold on us or on others, then we need to understand more about what the multiple contributing factors are that help to reinforce the power of that particular ideology. Neoliberal feminism is therefore not only resistible, but potentially vulnerable in multiple locations – although it may take a multi-pronged attack to successfully release its hold.

These three features of political ideologies – that they are interpretive constructs in constant flux whose strength derives from a multiplicity of factors – facilitate a *political understanding of political ideologies.* Our conceptualizations of political ideology can be political or anti-political; they can close down our capacity to imagine ourselves as agents capable of effecting change, or open it up. I invoke Freeden's approach to studying political ideologies, then, not only because I find that this is a more descriptively accurate way to understand what ideologies are and how they function, but also because I believe that this way of understanding ideologies has important and valuable political effects: namely, it positions human beings as agents who participate in the construction, the alteration and the rejection of ideologies, rather than as passive beings thoroughly controlled or manipulated

by them. Given the propensity among some academics today to represent neoliberalism and neoliberal feminism as irresistible behemoths, this way of conceptualizing ideologies may also give us insight into our agency in bringing ideologies like neoliberal feminism into being, and our capacity for agency in altering and undermining their hold on our thinking and behaviour.

For a political conception of neoliberal feminism

Let me offer here a brief sketch of what it looks like to study neoliberal feminism as a political ideology, drawing on the political conception of ideologies I have just outlined.[33] This means thinking about neoliberal feminism as a cluster of political concepts – a pattern of political ideas – that exist in relation to one another, and in relation to other contemporaneous ideologies. To do so requires resisting the tendency to view neoliberalism feminism as an uncanny double, or as wholly Other to feminism (exemplified in Fraser's work). Instead, I suggest we must take neoliberal feminism seriously as a variation of feminism, as an emergent political ideology to be theorized alongside of the extant categories of feminist political thought that were established in the 1970s and 1980s. We must accordingly reject the view that there is an 'authentic' feminism or feminisms from which neoliberal feminism represents an illegitimate deviation. Understanding neoliberal feminism as arising in a context that includes other feminist political ideologies means seeing both feminisms and individual feminists as playing an important role in its development. This decenters the role of neoliberal ideology as the singular agent in the rise of neoliberal feminism, and instead places neoliberal ideology into a broader context in which feminisms and feminists (among many other ideas and actors) also play a role.

As I noted earlier in the essay, it is especially challenging to study neoliberal feminism as a political ideology because it does not have any self-professed adherents. No one claims to be a neoliberal feminist; there are no neoliberal feminist t-shirts, bumper stickers, political parties or manifestos. While academics have converged on identifying some texts as examples of neoliberal feminism,[34] none of the authors of these texts identifies themselves or their ideas as neoliberal feminist. How then do we know that there even is enough empirical evidence to justify constructing a concept of neoliberal feminism as a political ideology?

The approach I take (inspired by Freeden) is to seek recurrent patterns of thinking that manifest in widely different areas of life concurrently, and so indicate the presence of a political ideology: a set of beliefs that shape thinking and behaviour across multiple dimensions of society. In particular, I seek to identify distinctive patterns of thinking that are neither captured by earlier categorizations of feminist political ideologies, nor captured by theorizations of neoliberalism: if it is to be helpful to say that neoliberal feminism is an ideology, this can only be because it differs meaningfully from other ideologies we have already identified as useful interpretive constructs for making sense of our political world.

Moreover, such an ideology must have a significant impact on thinking and behaviour to be worth studying. If a given pattern of thinking is only manifest in one, small part of public life (say, it only shows up in rhetoric justifying abortion policy under one particular party's leadership), this would not be sufficient evidence to establish that this is a political ideology; it might simply be a framing strategy that has no further hold on how people think and act. Similarly, if the pattern of thinking were manifest in just a few books by a small circle of authors, but did not show up anywhere else, that could be a sign that it functions

as a political ideology for a tiny community, but not that it has emerged as influential on the thought and behaviour of a larger portion of society. In order to be certain that these patterns are not merely incidental, I check to see whether they emerge in a wide variety of contexts. In particular, I have looked for these patterns in US presidential politics, in US foreign policy rhetoric, in feminist activism, in popular feminist writings, in academic feminist writings and in US popular culture more broadly understood. By presenting my findings in other countries and to an international community of academics, I have also checked my findings against what other scholars report, particularly in the UK and in Canada. Yet what I offer is only ever an interpretation; its validity rests in the capacity of the interpretation to provide a persuasive explanation of the patterns that we can observe in the world. An interpretation of a set of phenomena as constituting a distinctive political ideology must, therefore, be continually tested to see if it is the best explanation, and the interpretation that can account for the most observable phenomena.

The particular pattern of thinking that I identify as neoliberal feminism is a set of three political beliefs that recur together across a wide variety of contexts, thus forming the core concepts of the ideology. First is *individualization of persistent gender inequality*: any gender inequality that persists today is conceptualized primarily (if not entirely) as a consequence of individual choices. Neoliberal feminism thereby renders invisible structural analysis of gender. Second is *privatization of political responses*: since the problems have individual causes, it follows that the solutions must also be individual. There is no need for collective, political action to address inequality; in its place are calls for individuals to alter their beliefs and/or behaviour. Third is *liberation through capitalism*: the ultimate expression of women's liberation is seen in terms of women's successful participation in capitalism – whether in terms of women's capacity to consume freely, or in terms of women's capacity to compete in the capitalist workplace. The unbridled free market is the institutional mechanism by which we liberate women and ensure gender equality. The feminist is the entrepreneur, capable of competing alongside of men, and winning or losing in the marketplace according to her individual efforts and the vicissitudes of the economy.

I also trace the multiple conditions that have contributed to the rise and dissemination of neoliberal feminist ideology. Among these are structural shifts, such as Ronald Reagan's defunding and demotion of offices devoted to women's issues and gender equity during his Presidency,[35] or the stagnation (and in some sectors, decline) of male wages in the US, leading women's wages and integration into the capitalist workforce to become increasingly important even in heterosexual families with relatively traditional gendered divisions of labour.[36] Yet, there are also cultural shifts – ideas that emerge and are combined with feminisms in ways that contribute to the development of a neoliberal feminism: the rise of the self-help movement, the do-it-yourself movement, the development of alternative cultures that embrace self-objectification (neo-burlesque, roller derby and the like). And there are problems and contradictions experienced within feminist politics that contribute to its development: most notably, the conflict over second wave feminism's purported[37] exclusions of lesbians, women of colour, sex workers, trans persons, etc., produced a tendency to individualize feminism.[38] While at certain moments I can identify particular feminist actors who make significant contributions to the development of neoliberal feminism (as when the Feminist Majority teamed up with the George W. Bush administration to help sell the Afghanistan invasion to the American public as the liberation of Afghan women from barbaric, Taliban men)[39], in much more subtle ways feminism has contributed in

theoretical and practical fashions to the development of its neoliberal variant. Tracing the multiplicity of influences on neoliberal feminism is useful to illustrate how very complex the story of the rise of a new political ideology is, and how far it is from a simple story of neoliberalism repurposing feminism to suit its own ends.

Finally, I offer an account of why neoliberal feminism has been so appealing to so many people. Neoliberal feminism can only exercise a strong hold on the political imagination because it offers its adherents something that alternative ideologies do not, or do not any longer. I have argued that a great deal of its appeal lies in the pleasures it offers: the pleasures of avoiding conflict, of indulging in consumption and financial success, of getting along with other people.[40] Any ideology that would aim to supplant the power and influence of this one must address this question of pleasure: what alternative pleasures can be cultivated? What alternatives are there for addressing the problems that neoliberal feminism appears to solve?

We are currently at a moment when there has been a failure of political imagination among many feminists. In some cases, this is because feminists are captured by neoliberal feminism. Such feminists view this ideology as a kind of authentic feminism, and cannot imagine an alternative to it. In other cases, it is because, like Fraser, feminists are captured by a view of neoliberalism as an irresistible agent, and of feminism and feminists as its unwitting victims. They cannot imagine how neoliberalism is to be resisted, and they cannot imagine themselves as possessing agency sufficient to unseat or alter a seemingly hegemonic ideology.

In response, I approach the study of ideology as a problem of the political imagination. Studying ideologies is a way of denaturalizing them, loosening their hold on us, and opening ourselves up to alternatives already available to us, or alternatives not yet imagined. In calling attention to feminists' abandonment of the project of studying evolving feminist political ideologies, and to the anti-political assumptions implicit in the emerging literature on neoliberal feminism, I am diagnosing this failure of feminist imagination. If we adopt a political conception of political ideology, we can reveal neoliberal feminism to be perhaps the latest in a long tradition of evolving and changing feminist ideologies, rather than as either an authentic or inauthentic feminism. By contextualizing and historicizing neoliberal feminism, we may reveal feminist possibilities that are occluded by the hegemony of neoliberal feminism in the mainstream feminist imagination, and so point to alternatives that feminists might pursue.

This means in particular that we must attend to how feminists and feminist ideologies have contributed to the production of neoliberal feminism; importantly, feminists are not passive victims, but active producers and reproducers of neoliberal feminism. This is cause for hope, not despair: if feminists can contribute to the development of an ideology that they reject, this means they have the agency to contribute to its transformation. Indeed, no feminist ideology is truly hegemonic, but is always subject to variation, contestation and change (even if that change is slow or imperceptible to the political actor). The fact that ideologies change and develop opens up room for political imagination: even if a path to resistance is not immediately visible, this characteristic of ideology allows for the hope of a shift, even if it cannot be perceived, predicted or planned.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Diggs, 'What is the women's movement?,' *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, 2 (4), (1970), pp. 10–13.
2. While at the time Diggs wrote, feminists proclaimed themselves 'radical feminist' or 'socialist feminist,' they used the term 'liberal feminist' to label their feminist opponents. 'Liberal

feminist,' like 'neoliberal feminist' today, was not a label claimed by its adherents, at least not when the term was first coined.

3. Diggs, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 10.
4. Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983). This book elaborates the features of four feminist political ideologies, which she names liberal feminism, traditional Marxist feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism. In an earlier reader that she co-edited, Jaggar also included a fifth: conservative feminism. See Alison M. Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg Struhl, eds., *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations between Women and Men* (USA: McGraw-Hill, 1978).
5. In addition to the books by Jaggar, see Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Company, 1985); Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (USA: Westview Press, Inc., 1989). Both of these books (and their subsequent updated editions) survey many of the same categories of feminist ideology.
6. For example, there have been many attempts to derive an account of the core principles of Third Wave feminism. Yet this is a fundamentally incoherent project from the perspective of ideology studies, as it is premised upon the notion that feminists of the same generation could or should adopt more or less the same central beliefs, merely because of their location in time. Some scholars have conversely argued that Third Wave feminism is characterized by its absence of a shared political vision, or its refusal to stake out a political vision shared by all in the Third Wave. Given the wide variety of thinkers who often are lumped together as Third Wave, it is possible that our inability to locate a shared ideology among them is an artefact of classifying feminism in terms of temporality, rather than in terms of political ideology. If we were to look for political ideologies among Third Wave feminists, we might find multiple, competing ideologies (as well as some ideologies that would be distinctively non-political). For an overview of the literature on Third Wave feminism, see R. Claire Snyder-Hall, 'Third wave feminism: a new directions essay,' *Signs*, 34 (1), (2008), pp. 175–196. Snyder-Hall has also argued that some Third Wave feminism is best understood as a kind of anarchist feminism. See her 'Third-wave feminism and the defense of "choice"', *Perspectives on Politics*, 8 (1), (2010), pp. 255–261.
7. In his perceptive analysis of feminist ideology, for example, Michael Freeden draws heavily on Jaggar's ideological distinctions, which he then supplements with analysis of academic debates among feminist scholars – but not with political debates among feminist activists. Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 13.
8. I do not wish to overstate the distinction between politics 'in the streets' and in the academy; of course, feminist politics in the academy has been important, and feminist ideas developed in academic work have influenced feminist activism outside of the university setting. Nonetheless, if we are interested in feminist political ideologies, we need to look for clusters of political ideas that appeal to those beyond academia, and we also need to attend to ideologies that may originate outside of the academy.
9. For scholarship on neoliberal feminism, see Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2013); Sarah Jaffe, 'Trickle-down feminism,' *Dissent*, 60 (1), (2013), pp. 24–30; Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009); Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman* (Winchester, UK: Polity, 2009); Elisabeth Prügl, 'Neoliberalising feminism,' *New Political Economy*, 20 (4), (2015), pp. 614–631; Catherine Rottenberg, 'The rise of neoliberal feminism,' *Cultural Studies*, 28 (3), (2014), pp. 418–437; Kalpana Wilson, 'Towards a radical re-appropriation: gender, development and neoliberal feminism,' *Development and Change*, 46 (4), (2015), pp. 803–832. The label 'neoliberal feminism' is increasingly common outside of academia as well, but there is no consensus term. Some authors refer to 'consumer feminism' or 'post-feminism,' and Andi Zeisler has recently coined the term 'marketplace feminism.' Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016). There are differences in the phenomena

included by each of these authors under these different labels, but there is a general overlap in agreement on the characteristics of neoliberal feminism, as outlined in this essay.

10. Despite the careful delineations of different feminist ideologies decades ago, the term 'liberal feminist' is actually quite ambiguous and does not always carry the connection to liberal political ideology indicated here. See my discussion of this issue in Michaele L. Ferguson, 'Vulnerability by marriage: Okin's radical feminist critique of structural gender inequality,' *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy,* 31 (3), (2016), 687–703.
11. Prügl offers one exception to this general rule. She rejects the reductive view that neoliberalism has co-opted feminism, and argues instead that we need a more nuanced account of how feminism and neoliberalism interact in different contexts. Prügl, *op. cit*., Ref. 9.
12. While David Harvey and Pierre Bourdieu both offer more detailed and sophisticated accounts of neoliberalism, their theorizations also reference this ideology-absorbing feature of neoliberalism: it seems extraordinarily capable of absorbing and repurposing older political ideologies to suit its own ends. See e.g. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 41; Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1998), pp. 30–31. It is thus a conceptual pattern in theorizations of neoliberalism, to claim that it undermines our capacity to resist it, even if not all theorists go so far as to agree with Margaret Thatcher's infamous claim that 'There is no alternative.' Yet this view of neoliberalism is premised upon a view of political ideologies that I believe is ultimately incoherent.
13. Fraser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 1.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 14. Fraser is referencing Hester Eisenstein, 'A Dangerous Liaison? Feminism and Corporate Globalization,' *Science and Society*, 69 (3), (2005), pp. 487–518.
16. Fraser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, pp. 220, 11.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 221, emphasis added. Fraser regularly overlooks the many feminist activists who did not abandon the 'redistribution' paradigm in favour of the 'recognition' paradigm. It is beyond the scope of this paper to establish this point conclusively. But as a gesture toward making such a demonstration, we need only reflect on the fact that some feminists *did* vocally oppose the changes made to welfare in the 1990s, and worked actively to try to shape the legislation to mitigate some of the worst changes. Feminists did not simply watch helplessly: they variously supported the legislation, lobbied Congress and the White House and attempted to defeat or at least reshape the proposed policies. For an account and critique of feminist interventions in these debates, see Gwendolyn Mink, *Welfare's End* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002 [1998]); and 'Feminists, Welfare Reform and Welfare Justice,' *Social Justice*, 25 (1), (1998), pp. 146–157. Far from presenting feminism as unwittingly aiding neoliberalism, Mink shows that many feminists were *actively supportive* of the Personal Responsibility Act, on feminist grounds; and that other feminists and welfare rights activists were *actively opposed* to the bill, but were unsuccessful at generating widespread opposition to it. The feminists who Fraser alleges simply watched welfare reform happen, Mink's analysis suggests were often willing participants in welfare reform, or vocal opponents of it.
20. Fraser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 224. This characterization of neoliberal feminism as an uncanny double that resembles feminism, but is not feminism is another common feature of recent popular writing about feminist politics and politicians. See e.g. Liza Featherstone, ed. *False Choices: The Faux Feminism of Hillary Rodham Clinton* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2016); Jill Filipovich, 'Ivanka Trump's Dangerous Fake Feminism,' *The New York Times*, January 13 2017; Zeisler, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–76.
21. Fraser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 224.
22. Fraser is never clear in writing about neoliberalism what exactly she means by this term, and how exactly it constitutes a singular agency capable of the desires and actions she attributes to it.

23. Fraser, of course, locates hope and possibility in transnational feminism at Fraser, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9, p. 13. She also calls for feminists to 'reclaim' their ideas (*ibid.*, pp. 225–26), a move that presupposes a conception of a pure feminist ideology to be reclaimed or reappropriated from neoliberalism. The reclaiming of feminist ideas and rhetoric from neoliberalism is another recurring theme in the literature. See e.g. Wilson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9; Christine Keating, Claire Rasmussen and Pooja Rishi, 'The rationality of empowerment: microcredit, accumulation by dispossession, and the gendered economy,' *Signs*, 36 (1), (2010), pp. 153–176.
24. It is especially peculiar that Fraser does not view ideologies as historical and changing since she locates herself within the tradition of socialist theory. Surely she is aware that ideologies change and would concede the point readily, but this does not seem to inflect her narrative about neoliberal feminism.
25. I make an argument about anti-political and political modes of conceptualizing feminist ideology in particular in Michaele Ferguson, 'Trump is a feminist (and other cautionary tales for our neoliberal age),' *Theory & Event*, 20 (1, Supplement), (2017), pp. 53–67.
26. Michael Freeden, 'Thinking politically and thinking about politics,' in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, ed. David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 208.
27. Freeden does allow that scholars of political ideology can offer their judgments separately from their analysis, when they are 'operating in ethical mode, not as analysts of ideology.' *Ibid.*, p. 210.
28. Cf. Freeden, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7, p. 2.
29. While the examples I give here are all of human agency that is likely conscious and intentional in its actions, as Freeden notes, political ideologies are also the product of unconscious actions. See *ibid.*, pp. 33–36.
30. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
32. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Third ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), §66. Wittgenstein's understanding of thread-spinning has its limits: in the case of silk, thread is in fact composed of a single, continuous strand running the entire length of the thread.
33. It is not possible within the confines of this article to offer sufficient evidence to support my particular interpretation of neoliberal feminism, and so I can only assert it here. I refer the reader to other published works for more substantiation of these claims. On the relationship of neoliberal feminism to feminist ideas and politics, see Michaele Ferguson, 'Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics,' *Perspectives on Politics*, 8 (1), (2010), pp. 247–253. In that early essay, I was concerned with a phenomenon called 'choice feminism,' which I now take to be a symptom of the larger phenomenon of neoliberal feminism. I discuss examples of neoliberal feminism in US presidential politics and feminist activism in Michaele L. Ferguson, '"Women are not an interest group": the issue of women's issues in the 2012 presidential campaign,' *Theory & Event*, 16 (1), (2013); and Ferguson, *op. cit.*, Ref. 25. I discuss manifestations of neoliberal feminism in US popular culture as well in Michaele L. Ferguson, 'Choice Feminism's Honey Trap,' https://contemporarycondition.blogspot.com/2014/03/choice-feminisms-honey-trap.html; and 'Validating Women, Judging Men: The Therapeutic Non-Politics of Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In,' https://contemporarycondition.blogspot.com/2013/11/validating-women-judging-men.html.
34. Most frequently mentioned is Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).
35. Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003), pp. 177ff.
36. Thomas B. Edsall, 'The increasing significance of the decline of men,' *The New York Times*, March 16 2017.
37. I say purported here because these accusations are often repeated today as a blanket condemnation of second wave feminism, when these concerns are really only accurate for particular feminists at particular moments. Second wave feminism, understood as a reference

to feminism in a particular historical period, includes a wide variety of feminist political ideologies, only some of which were exclusionary on some dimensions at certain times. In other words, not all feminists who could be classed as 'second wave' were exclusionary, in the same ways and at the same times.

38. See Ferguson 2010, *op. cit.*, Ref. 33.
39. Elisabeth Bumillller, 'A nation challenged: shaping opinion; first lady to speak about afghan women,' *The New York Times*, November 16 2001.
40. See Ferguson 2010, *op. cit.*, Ref. 33.

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