

Feminist activism and presidential politics

Theorizing the costs of the 'insider strategy'

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The 1996 presidential election will be remembered by political analysts in the USA for its 'gender gap'. Polls show that women backed Clinton over Dole by 59 to 35 per cent, while men split their vote almost evenly, 43 to 44 per cent. Many assume that this gap emerged because Dole and the Christian Coalition that shapes much of Republican policy are viciously opposed to reproductive choice for women, while Clinton is a staunch defender of women's rights. Prominent feminists such as Gloria Steinem called on women to cast their vote for Clinton, declaring that there were significant differences between his positions and those of Dole, and that it is our job as feminists to move Clinton to the left.

The situation, however, is much more complicated than this. We will only be able to deal with the challenge of pursuing feminist activism in a world that is profoundly shaped by transnational capital and hybrid racist sexism to the extent that we develop much more sophisticated theories about power, identity and ideology. Clinton's Centre-Right has succeeded in part because it has effectively deployed strategies of neutralization, appropriation, co-optation and colonization. Feminist rhetoric was used by the Clinton camp to sell his Centre-Right agenda, in spite of the fact that it includes several major anti-feminist elements. Clinton himself was skilfully constructed as pro-feminist while his campaign deliberately pre-empted and censored his feminist critics. American feminists have almost completely lost the power to define their own discourse and to explore what Eisenstein once optimistically called the 'radical future of liberal feminism'.¹ Now, more than ever, we need to develop feminist theories that can analyse the neutralizing articulation of feminist discourse, for this operation is threatening to eliminate

the very possibility of a truly subversive form of feminist activism.

Representational strategies and feminist discourse

Clinton was not, of course, the only presidential candidate who deployed complex ideological strategies. When the Republican campaign learned during the summer of 1996 that many voters were offended by the extremism of the religious Right, they adopted a fundamentally contradictory strategy. Within the party, every effort was made to accommodate the extremist demands of the Christian Coalition into the official party platform. In this moment, the Republican Party constructed America as an all-out war between two great chains of equivalence, the 'good' versus the 'evil'.

While the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) found its most eloquent opponent in Mexico among the Zapatistas, that same role was claimed by right-wing figures in the USA. Republican presidential primary candidate Pat Buchanan blended his religious fundamentalist, racist and xenophobic discourse together with explicit attacks on corporate greed. Buchanan's specific version of the 'good' versus 'evil' antagonism constructed a chain of equivalence that united right-wing moral authoritarians with unemployed white working-class males in opposition against not only the usual enemies of the religious Right – feminists, homosexuals, 'permissive' liberal officials, the so-called leftist news media, and so on – but blacks, immigrants, and the chief executive officers of America's largest corporations as well. Buchanan's bid enjoyed a substantial groundswell of popular support among white workers until the Republican leadership and

the politically astute Christian Coalition leadership ensured his defeat.²

When addressing audiences outside the party, however, Republican discourse took the form of the logic of difference. Dole attempted to take the moral high ground as he constructed the Republican Party as a site in which Americans from all ‘walks of life’ were welcome and respected. Dole worked for months, with limited success, to include in the party’s extremist platform language that recognized the legitimacy of pro-choice Republicans. Explicit extremist language about abortion and gay rights was almost completely dropped from Dole’s public discourse,³ and he waited until his defeat was certain before emphasizing his anti-affirmative action and anti-immigration positions. Women, people of colour and the handicapped were prominently featured in the party’s convention and campaign materials.

We should mention in passing that religious-Right activists are clearly frustrated with the Republicans’ dual strategy because it failed to work for Dole. The religious Right, unlike the neo-conservative Republicans, cannot take any solace in the fact that Clinton has embraced a basically neo-conservative approach to social policy. Their priority remains the imposition of a right-wing moral agenda, and they view Clinton as a dogmatic defender of leftist permissiveness and secular humanism. We should anticipate more tensions within the coalition between the religious Right and the neo-conservatives; tensions between the more pragmatic leadership of the religious Right and its more dogmatic grassroots membership; an enormous surge in grassroots religious-Right activity in school boards, local and state government, petition drives, and ballot initiatives; and the expansion of new extremist social movements such as the right-wing militias and the all-male Promise Keepers.⁴

Although the Republicans made at least some attempt to juxtapose their exclusionary logic of discourse with an inclusionary logic of difference, the Clinton camp deployed much more effective techniques with respect to the centring of right-wing extremism. Eisenstein contends that Clinton’s articulation of feminine and feminist signifiers played a key role in his campaign. Clinton was constructed as a ‘caring and sharing’ voter-friendly leader for the 1990s: he promised that he ‘felt the pain’ of the voters, and struck a responsible pose by pledging action on popular symbolic issues such as teen smoking, school uniforms, violence on television and crime. The Republicans themselves laid much of the groundwork for this construction of Clinton as Dole’s feminine ‘other’; they created the

room for the blatant extremism of Newt Gingrich, Pat Buchanan, the Christian Coalition and right-wing terrorists; they shut down the government during their 1995 budget standoff with Clinton; and they chose a stiff and elderly Washington insider as their presidential candidate.

Eisenstein argues that Clinton, by positioning himself as the spouse of an empowered woman, and by staking out the pro-choice position, won pseudo-feminist credentials. She offers a fascinating analysis of the way in which Hillary Rodham Clinton has been masculinized to symbolize feminist excess precisely to create a safe space for the construction of Bill Clinton as her compassionate feminine counterpart.⁵ Women of all races are less likely than men to view the budget deficit as an urgent priority, and they are more likely than men to support education spending, affirmative action, civil rights, gay rights, health-care reform, and welfare programmes.⁶ Through his symbolic promises, and his appropriation of feminist discourse on abortion, Clinton won just enough support from women voters.

Clinton also masterfully transformed his small set of progressive accomplishments into solid evidence of his principled leadership against the Gingrich–Dole Republican Congress. He vetoed the ban on late-term abortions, and saw that the act that provides for unpaid family leave was passed, along with the Violence Against Women Act and the ban on assault weapons. Pollitt nevertheless described these accomplishments as a ‘short, narrowly tailored list’.⁷ Clinton also established an impressive record with respect to the appointment of women and minorities to his administration. Underneath his apparent inclusiveness, however, Clinton actually abandoned many of these candidates and appointees – such as Zoë Baird, Lani Guinier and Jocelyn Elders – when they threatened to interrupt his Centre-Right agenda. Throughout his first term, and in the early days of his second, Clinton has chosen to establish a traditional male-dominated work environment and to surround himself with increasingly right-wing advisors.⁸ While Clinton did speak out in support of affirmative action, he carefully qualified that support to allow himself plenty of room for future capitulations. During the campaign, he and his party remained almost completely silent about the anti-affirmative-action ballot initiative in California until he had obtained a safe lead over Dole in the state.⁹ The initiative passed with 54 per cent support.

As the Republicans gave more and more authority to the Christian Coalition, Clinton and the conservative Democrats knew very well that they offered the only

credible discourse that could articulate the pro-choice position. Cockburn points out that this situation gave Clinton enormous leeway in his judicial appointments. He was assured of feminist support for his appointees simply because they were pro-choice; he knew in advance that the fact that they were extremely pro-business would be ignored.¹⁰

Clinton had already made significant efforts to foreclose feminist criticism before the final days of the campaign. Progressive advocates had been lured by government appointments and access to the White House to the extent that they had already abandoned the option of expressing oppositional dissent.¹¹ Marian Wright Edelman, leader of the Children's Defence Fund, remained silent after Clinton signed the draconian welfare bill; environmentalists praised the administration, in spite of its anti-green record; and gay rights groups endorsed Clinton even after months of Democratic heterosexist nuclear-family rhetoric and Clinton's signing of the bill that allows states to ban gay marriages. Feminists and progressives who did criticize Clinton were marginalized and censored at the Democratic Convention by Clinton's campaign machinery.¹²

The effects of these strategies are profound. We should consider, first, the ways in which Clinton's political tactics have reconstituted feminist activism. Feminists have been encouraged to seek gains for narrowly defined single-issue campaigns, such as abortion, without any consideration of broad-based coalition-building. Further, they have been 'rewarded' for choosing to work within the terms established by the Clinton administration; those who fail to do so have been excluded. Piven argues that women's groups and social-welfare advocacy groups chose to pursue what she calls the 'insider strategy', even though they knew very well that it entailed the surrender of their right to autonomous critique and oppositional activism.¹³ Pollitt contends that these developments have seriously weakened the feminist movement, as more and more feminist leaders succumb to the 'fantasy of access and influence: to the siphoning off of energies into wishy-washy "advocacy," Beltway schmooze [Washington lobbying] and fundraising for "moderate" Democrats who happen to be women or minorities.'¹⁴

Eisenstein, Piven or Pollitt do not ignore the fact that feminists must deploy a complex combination of struggles both within and against the predominant structures of electoral politics in the United States. Feminist activism must continue to take the form of a mobile war of position that shifts back and forth between infiltration, constructive engagement and sub-

version from within dominant institutions on the one hand, and vigorous principled opposition on the other, where the price of normalization and institutionalization is too high. They are not, in other words, calling for a feminist activism that would occupy a position of pure exteriority; at this point in the struggle, serious feminist activists no longer think politics in terms of a simple choice between pure insider and pure outsider positions. What they are recognizing, however, is that the Clinton forces, and much of the neo-conservative Centre-Right and Right in general, have 'hegemonized' feminist discourse. They have learned how to appropriate key feminist slogans and turn them to their advantage, even though they have done little to advance concrete feminist struggles, and have actually pursued many specific policies that contradict feminist principles. The Clinton Democrats and other neo-conservatives have also learned how to construct their colonized version of feminism as the only legitimate form – such that it seems to exhaust the totality of acceptable feminist discourse.

The rightward migration of Clinton's 'Centre'

The charge that Clinton engaged not only in an attempt to redefine feminist positions, but in a bid to hegemonize feminist activism while pursuing a fundamentally reactionary agenda, can only be substantiated by examining his concrete policies in detail. While Clinton did veto the ban on late-term abortions, his policies left the status quo on abortion largely intact. That status quo is structured according to a class-differentiated system of access. As many as 84 per cent of American counties have no abortion providers. States are free to impose mandatory counselling, waiting periods and parental approval for women under the age of eighteen. In a country in which there is no national health service, the states are also allowed to exclude coverage for abortions by Medicaid, the health-care plan for the poor.¹⁵

Clinton's articulation of conservative 'family values' rhetoric has also contradicted the broader feminist goal of securing not just abortion rights for the wealthy, but the right for every woman to determine her reproductive choices freely. In contemporary American politics, the pursuit of this goal must include the defence of poor women's right to have children in the first place. Clinton's claim that 'teen pregnancy' constitutes nothing less than an 'epidemic' that threatens the 'national interest' corresponds too neatly with right-wing anxieties about the 'excessive' fertility of the poor. Poor single mothers on welfare have been

grossly demonized; they are widely portrayed as hedonistic agents of a dysgenic population boom among the mostly black and Latino ‘underclass’. Allegations of this nature by the media and mainstream political figures alike have remained immune to empirical refutation. The reproduction rate among black teenage women has actually declined, and it only appears to be growing because the reproduction rate among older black women has declined more rapidly. Under the current law, the states are free to experiment with any number of official welfare measures that interfere with poor women’s right to have children. In some localities, teenage mothers are being charged with fornication or coerced by public officials into marriages. While right-wing commentators such as Murray express – in pseudo-feminist terms – a deep concern about the availability of abortion, birth control and adoption services for ‘underclass’ mothers,¹⁶ the eugenicist spectre of women on welfare being forced to take Norplant lies on the horizon. Clinton’s own discourse has only exacerbated these assaults on the reproductive freedoms of all but the most wealthy women.

Clinton’s support for free trade is devastating for American workers; his anti-terrorist legislation marks a significant setback for civil liberties; his pledges of support for the inner cities are meaningless without a substantial jobs creation programme; his inaction on campaign finance reform perpetuates the corporate grip on Washington;¹⁷ his record on the environment is appalling;¹⁸ his pandering to conservative Cuban-Americans has resulted in the strengthening of the Cuban blockade;¹⁹ and the much-hyped increase in

the minimum wage still leaves a family of four under the poverty line. Through his policies, fundraising practices and personal conduct he encourages voters to lower their expectations about what governments can accomplish.²⁰ He has normalized the right-wing campaign against illegal immigration with escalated border patrols and harsh legislation.²¹ He has abandoned his own moderate proposals to reform health care; not only will he not promote a single payer scheme, he will not even take on the for-profit Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) that now dominate the health-care industry. He promised to support gay rights, but capitulated on the issue of gays in the military, gave no power to his AIDS ‘czar’, distanced himself from his gay supporters, enthusiastically embraced the ideology that children should only be raised by married heterosexual couples, and signed a bill that allows states to ban gay marriages.²²

Eisenstein, Piven and Pollitt view Clinton’s approval of the welfare law that was passed in August 1996 as his greatest betrayal of feminist principles. This law changes welfare from a national entitlement programme to a system of block grants that allows the states to decide how to spend the funds. It eliminates the right of the poor to federal assistance, and gives a free rein to the very level of government that is notorious for its exclusionary policies and closed-door deal-making. No state will be able to provide benefits after two years, or to provide benefits to a recipient who has been on welfare for more than five years during her entire lifetime. The bill does not include any new provisions for job creation, job training or child-care.

The United States already had the greatest, as well as the fastest growing, gap between the rich and the poor, and the worst record for aid to the poor in the entire ‘Western’ world before this bill was passed. Poor people will be forced to seek work in a country in which the Federal Reserve is deliberately controlling interest rates to maintain a high un-employment level, which currently stands at seven million. In America’s inner cities, there are fourteen



applicants for every job in a fast-food restaurant. Automation, globalization, specialization according to comparative advantage, and government cutbacks are rapidly eliminating the jobs in the industrial manufacturing and government service sectors. These are precisely the sectors in which Americans with only a high-school education could find a skilled or semi-skilled unionized job that paid a living wage. Today, these same Americans are experiencing a dramatic decrease in wealth as they become massively grouped in the low-paying, unskilled and non-unionized service sector. As the August 1996 welfare law is put into effect, 3.5 million children will be dropped from public assistance by 2001, and a million more children will be thrown into poverty. This will take place in a country in which one out of four children already lived under the poverty line in 1994; in which over 4,200 babies below twelve months of age already died every year as of 1996 because of low birth weight and other problems related to the poverty of their mothers.

For reasons stemming directly from historical traditions in which blacks, Latinos and some Asians were systematically excluded from accumulating the resources necessary for upward class mobility, racial minorities remain overrepresented among the population that is experiencing the greatest decreases in family income. In 1991, the typical white household was ten times more wealthy than the typical black household. Compared to whites, African-Americans have a 100 per cent greater infant mortality rate, a 176 per cent greater unemployment rate, and a 300 per cent greater poverty rate.²³

Clinton's repeal of welfare rights coincides with other public policies that have only exacerbated the growing inequalities in the distribution of wealth. With its strict time limits, the implementation of the welfare law will require extensive inter-state record-keeping, which will in turn open up a huge new market for the capital-intensive information technology sector. Keynesianism is not entirely dead, even though the Reagan administrations made the maintenance of government programmes impossible by deliberately running up huge deficits. There is a covert boom in the military, policing, penitentiary and public-surveillance sectors within the budgets of the federal, state and local governments, while overt campaigns against governmental health, education, poverty and housing expenditures have been launched with full force. In the first days of his second term, Clinton attempted to construct himself as a pro-public-education president, but his major initiative in this area was a tax break that will mostly benefit the middle class. While the

repeal of welfare rights was justified in terms of balanced-budget rhetoric, private corporations have never paid such a small share of federal taxes, and they have never received more public subsidies; corporate welfare is four times greater than aid to the poor; middle-class home-owners continue to receive non-means-tested mortgage subsidies; and little is said about the savings-and-loan bail-outs and the bloated Pentagon budget.²⁴

Meanwhile wealthy Americans – a class in which whites are vastly overrepresented – are pursuing an increasingly segregationist agenda which fundamentally erodes the notion of collective responsibility. Federal taxes for the rich are cut, necessitating not only massive cuts in government programmes but also increases in the state and local taxes that are less fair for the lower middle class, workers and the poor. Public transportation cuts reduce the mobility of the poor, school zoning boundaries are drawn to isolate the middle class, school voucher programmes that would use public funds to subsidize wealthy children's private school tuition are proposed, while gated suburban communities cut themselves off from the inner-city tax base. The Republican Congress approved an experimental plan that sets up government subsidies for individuals who want to opt out of private group health insurance to obtain their own personal coverage. More and more corporations are eliminating the pension plans that used to cover their entire workforce and replacing them with generous tax-subsidized plans for the highest-paid managers.²⁵ For the rich, privatization is not enough; they are now demanding explicitly segregationist forms of privatization.

Passive revolution and expansive hegemony

Our analysis of the Democratic Party's bid to hegemonize feminism can be clarified with reference to Gramsci's distinction between the 'passive revolution' and 'expansive hegemony'. A 'passive revolution' portrays itself as a popular and democratic movement, but it actually engages in profoundly anti-democratic strategies. It neutralizes social movements by satisfying some of their demands in a symbolic and reformist manner, and shifts authority towards disciplinary apparatuses. Strictly speaking, Gramsci makes a clear distinction between 'passive' revolution and hegemony, for a traditional 'passive' moment is largely statist and bureaucratic; the 'masses' do not take an active part, and brute force, rather than the organization of consent, becomes predominant. Further, Gramsci insists that the 'passive revolution' includes substantial economic

intervention by the state, a dimension that is almost anachronistic in contemporary globalizing economies. Gramsci's conception of the 'passive' revolution nevertheless contains the provocative image of a pseudo-popular movement that wins some small degree of consent by responding to some of the popular demands from the grassroots, but uses that appearance of popular consent only to gain strategic ground for its fundamentally anti-democratic project. It seeks to absorb and to assimilate democratic forces by appropriating key elements of alternative popular world-views, neutralizing their critical potential by redefining them, and then articulating these colonized elements into its world-view.²⁶

Authoritarian forms of hegemony remain fundamentally contradictory, for they attempt to represent themselves as popular democratic movements, even though they engage in all sorts of containment strategies, and pursue initiatives that perpetuate the unequal distribution of power. While maintaining the façade of a popular mobilizing force, they do not hesitate to demobilize key sectors of the populace by engaging in blatant disenfranchisement tactics, or by dragging the political centre so far to the right that more and more people have no reason to participate in the political system. We are now witnessing extensive efforts to lower political participation in the United States. The Clinton Democrats have worked together with the other forces on the right to lower popular expectations about what governments ought to achieve. Clinton has also indirectly benefited from the promotion, on the part of the far Right and the religious Right, of a popular paranoia about the evil forces that lurk within state apparatuses. In spite of their different rhetoric, the far Right, the religious Right, the neo-conservative Right, and the neo-conservative Centre-Right have constructed a lasting consensus: public programmes – with the exception of the military, the police, public surveillance and the penitentiary system – are suspect; concepts of collective responsibility are obsolete.

There is nothing in the contradictions within authoritarian hegemonies, however, that will by themselves lead to their self-destruction. Not only can contradictory political discourses remain brutally effective;



they can also make their contradictions a source of strength. As Hall argued with respect to Thatcherism, an authoritarian hegemonic project does not actually need to construct a fully mobilized majority of enthusiastic supporters. It only needs to achieve the disorganization of the potential opposition and the minimum degree of mobilization necessary for the construction of a 'popular' façade for the regime.²⁷

Gramsci contends that where authoritarian 'passive revolutions' have become institutionalized, democratic forces will have to wage a protracted 'war of position' and struggle to advance an 'expansive hegemony'. Multiple struggles that are plural and contextually sensitive in form will have to be deployed at each of the various sites throughout the social in which the 'passive revolution' has become entrenched. Where a 'passive revolution' seeks to neutralize the democratic opposition and to construct a simulacrum popular movement while perpetuating structural inequality, an 'expansive hegemony' seeks to promote a genuinely democratic mobilization of progressive social movements.²⁸ Authoritarian hegemony aims to achieve a maximum disciplining of difference; even as it pretends to endorse pluralism, it can only promote a fake multiculturalism. By contrast, the radical democratic pluralist approach – expansive hegemony – attempts to construct the sorts of unifying discourses that enhance and promote democratic forms of plurality and difference. Confronted with a plurality of progressive struggles already in motion, it seeks to release the democratic potential within each of them, while bringing them into mutually constitutive articulatory

relations. It values the autonomy of each democratic struggle as a good in itself, and in a pragmatic sense: autonomy facilitates the sort of contextually specific contestation of oppression and exploitation that is needed in today's complex and hybrid social formations. Where authoritarian hegemony strictly regulates the development of political contestation, radical democratic pluralist hegemony multiplies the points of contestation and seeks to broaden the terrain of politicization or reactivation.²⁹ The relatively universalistic effects of the radical democratic pluralist horizon seeks to institutionalize deeper and deeper recognition of the plurality and autonomy of the public spaces created by democratic struggles, while perpetually postponing the final definition of the good.³⁰ To the extent that the specific discourses of the relatively autonomous progressive struggles are successfully articulated with a radical civic sense, the multiplication of these public spaces becomes a source of strength for democratic society.³¹

Passive revolution and feminist strategy

Clinton's political linkages with the Democratic Leadership Council situated him squarely within the part of the Democratic Party that has traditionally embraced a 'passive-revolution' strategy. The direction and structure of his leadership did nevertheless seem to be open to alternative possibilities when he defeated Bush in 1992. Throughout his first term, however, Clinton distanced himself more and more from progressive positions and prioritized neo-conservative policies.

Feminist leaders, for the most part, failed to adjust their strategies accordingly. In a key article that was published in *Ms.*, the flagship feminist magazine, just before the 1996 election, Steinem declared that women ought to vote for Clinton and then work hard to make his positions more progressive. She rightly pointed out that right-wing victories depend on a contradictory populism: the mobilization of right-wing voters and the demobilization of everyone else. She could have also pointed out that the rich vote in overwhelmingly larger numbers than the poor in the USA.³² But Steinem also claimed that the Republicans gain whenever we argue that there is little difference between them and the Democrats, because this argument makes the Republicans appear more moderate and discourages Democratic voters from going to the polls. To her credit, she did argue that Clinton failed on welfare, gays in the military and gay marriage, but she asserted that Clinton will only differ from the Republicans

where he has the popular support to do so, and that it is the task of progressive movements to create that support.³³

Steinem assumed that the prevailing political structure actually does correspond to the pluralist interest group model's predictions; that the system remains ready to respond to a feminist popular mobilization. She depicted Clinton's capitulation to the neo-conservative Right not as the fruit of his own convictions but as the product of the Republican-weighted balance of power. In this and other similar representations, Clinton is figured as a vulnerable victim of Republican power who reluctantly supports right-wing positions when he would secretly prefer to take a much more progressive stance. Considerations about co-optation, neutralizing articulations and colonization were absent from her argument. Steinem therefore laid most of the burden with respect to the advance of the feminist struggle at the door of feminists. Because the existing system 'works', we feminists only have to redouble our efforts. New strategies and radical transformations of the entire political structure are not required.

The article reproduced the arguments used by Congresswoman Waters, Smeal, Steinem, Abzug, and other leading feminists at the 1996 Democratic Convention. They called for feminists to vote for Clinton. They also argued that Clinton was forced into signing the welfare bill; they contended that because of the electoral strength of the Republicans, his bid for a second term would have failed if he had opposed the repeal of welfare rights. From their perspective, feminists had to campaign to put Clinton back into office so that he would be able to reverse the welfare bill during his second term.³⁴

Clinton's feminist supporters, however, ignored the fact that Clinton had maintained a substantial and steady lead over a Republican contender since the Republicans had shut down the government during the budget stalemate in 1995.³⁵ Clinton had nevertheless vetoed two other welfare bills during that period. Some of the Democrats who were up for re-election in the House and the Senate voted against the welfare bill and then easily won their races. There is also substantial evidence that Clinton agreed with the basic provisions in the bill. Not only had he adopted the Republican terms of the welfare debate years before he signed it; he had joined with other neo-conservatives in a consistent campaign to get the attack on welfare rights onto the mainstream political agenda. On the 1996 campaign trail, Clinton explicitly championed the repeal of welfare rights before conservative audiences. In other campaign venues, he promised to 'fix' some

of the bill during his second term, especially the provisions that stop legal immigrants from receiving benefits. Welfare policy experts predicted, however, that Clinton would fail if he attempted to change the fundamental aspect of the bill, namely the basic repeal of welfare rights.³⁶ In any event, Clinton reversed his position after his re-election; he now promises merely to introduce small changes to the new welfare policy. Behind the scenes, conservative Democrats are planning to privatize social security.³⁷

The most damning evidence about Clinton's decision-making process on the bill comes from a participant in a White House advisors' meeting that took place in August 1996. He states that when Morris, Clinton's infamous pollster, argued that the president needed to sign the welfare bill to win the November 1996 election, everyone else completely disagreed with him. Morris's pro-welfare-repeal side ultimately won the debate in the White House, but its prevailing argument was based on Clinton's political values, rather than reluctantly deployed electoral tactics. Writing on the eve of the election, Hitchens concluded that, 'The Clinton Administration does not do what it does because it is constrained, by a first term or an impending election or anything of the kind, to do so. It does these things out of conviction.'³⁸

Women voters who chose Clinton over Dole because they believed that he would be a staunch defender of the welfare safety net were therefore misled. Clinton's 'gender gap' was built on his neutralizing appropriation of feminist and feminine symbols, rather than his underlying convictions. But Patricia Ireland, the president of the National Organization of Women (NOW), stood virtually alone as a major feminist leader when she called for massive opposition against Clinton's support for the welfare bill. To her credit, she went on a well-publicized hunger strike after the bill was passed, and declared that, although she would vote for Clinton, she would not campaign for him in any way. NOW directed its campaign support exclusively behind the House Democrats and the one senator running for re-election, Paul Wellstone, who voted against it.³⁹ NOW also worked with civil rights' organizations, progressive unions and radical students in the ultimately unsuccessful campaign to defeat the anti-affirmative action Proposition 209 in California. When Ireland tried to bring her oppositional campaign to the Democratic Convention, she was prevented by party officials from launching a significant protest.⁴⁰

Pollitt, like Eisenstein, fundamentally questions the assumption held by Steinem and other pro-Clinton feminists that Clinton's decisions are merely the product

of tactical decision-making in the face of Republican power. She states that instead of blaming Clinton's neo-conservatism on the Republican Congress, we should see the leading politicians of both parties as symptoms of a global phenomenon: 'the slashing of the welfare state, the lowering of the working class's standard of living and the upward transfer of wealth'. She asserts that we can 'plausibly argue that Clinton prepared [the] way [for the Republican Congress] by accepting Republican terms of debate'. Pollitt concludes that although a second Bush administration might have introduced worse measures in some policy areas, only Clinton had the strategic position that allowed him to neutralize democratic opposition within and outside Congress with such a devastating effect.⁴¹

Many progressive feminists are rejecting Steinem's approach, and are advocating a much more sceptical approach towards the Democratic Party. They are exploring alternative strategies such as third parties and more autonomous oppositional movements. Burk and Hartmann, for example, contend that American feminist activism has concentrated too exclusively on the single-issue campaign to defend the status quo on abortion; that it must do more to link abortion rights to economic rights; and that it must pay more attention to the issues that concern women the most – namely, pay equity, pensions, health care and violence. Burk and Hartmann point out that feminist leaders have not done enough to construct feminism as one of the transnational sites of resistance against the escalation in economic exploitation in the globalizing economy. They claim that this shift in strategy would make the women's movement more relevant to working-class women of colour.⁴²

Popular feminist intellectuals and neo-conservatism

Neo-conservative discourse often successfully seizes upon the weaknesses of single-issue reformist feminist identity politics. Many right-wing forces subversively borrow identity-politics strategies from the Left and either promote right-wing elements within existing social movements or invent their own versions of grassroots activism and 'diversity'. Anti-feminist women intellectuals, for example, are celebrated as the spokespersons for the attack on women's studies that is launched in the name of vague pseudo-feminist principles. Blacks and non-Anglo immigrants have emerged as the prominent leaders for anti-affirmative action and anti-multiculturalism movements. Identity-politics discourse legitimated the validity of discourse that is located with respect to the experience of women

and minorities. This argument undoubtedly had a progressive effect in so far as it promoted a critique of sexist and racist discourse that passed itself off as universal. But neo-conservatives have begun to turn the logic of identity-politics discourse to their advantage. Speaking from what they call their special black and ethnic-minority perspectives, these right-wing women and people of colour condemn affirmative action and multiculturalism for promoting racist divisions, thereby identifying the anti-racists as the worst racists. These tactics not only contribute to the legitimation of right-wing policies, but also threaten to redefine the entire terrain of feminist and anti-racist politics.

Further, neo-conservative politicians and corporate marketing strategies have successfully normalized an astonishingly reactionary definition of feminism in the United States. Feminist success is now widely equated with any socio-economic gain that is achieved by any individual woman by any means necessary. Two recent popular films, *First Wives' Club* and *Waiting to Exhale*, portray women's liberation in crassly consumeristic terms. Nike's sports shoe advertisements embrace women's athletics on explicitly feminist grounds, while their \$140 shoes are made by women in Indonesia working for \$2.20 a day, and by women in China and Vietnam working for \$30 a month.⁴³ A recent notice on Cornell University's Women's Studies Programme's list-serve advertised an event that was simply called 'Women's Leadership Seminar'. The notice described the women speakers only in terms of their affiliations with the World Bank and private corporations. The term 'feminist' was noticeably absent.

Among middle-class girls and young women, there are ambiguous signs of backlash and rebellion. In her excellent book, *Reviving Ophelia*,⁴⁴ Piper, a therapist who works with young teenage women, reports on the extremely hostile environments that they confront on a daily basis in their schools, relationships and families. I myself am seeing more and more intelligent young middle-class women struggle against the cultural forces that encourage them to 'dumb down' their public speaking performance; sometimes, their brilliance comes through only obliquely or only in their writing.

If we wade carefully through the Disney-ABC/Time Warner-Turner-CNN/General Electric-NBC/Westinghouse-CBS/Murdoch-Fox/Viacom-Paramount-MTV/Bertelsman swamp of media oligopolies that almost completely defines American 'popular culture',⁴⁵ we can find promising moments of young women's rebellion. It is the anger of Courtney Love, Queen Latifah, Alanis Morissette and Ani di Franco, and not the co-depend-

ence of Janis Joplin, that turns these women on. But their tattoos and piercings are barely healed before they are stolen from them by powerful media interests. They may find their way into political activism through indirect and unconventional routes; they are more likely to enter progressive activist discourse via animal rights and vegetarianism than via feminism, for they can more easily identify with the innocence and helplessness of small animals, or the beauty and dignity of an old growth forest, than they can insist on their own rights. Some of my women students are participating in new and exciting multiracial coalitions to fight the attack on affirmative action; others are going to the new labour organizing summer schools. But these young women are confronted with something that we never had to deal with – namely, the false image that we already inhabit a post-feminist terrain, as feminist demands are appropriated by right-wing forces and private corporations and bent to serve their reactionary interests.⁴⁶

If feminist leaders have, for the most part, failed to grasp the dynamics of contemporary politics in which the possibilities for the genuine advance of feminist struggle have been sharply curtailed, and 'feminism' has been given a reactionary and anti-feminist meaning, popular feminist intellectuals have not, on the whole, done much better. The idea that 'feminist success' means virtually any socio-economic gain for any individual woman that is achieved by any means necessary is explicitly promoted by Wolf. In her individualist 'power feminism' theory, she attacks radical feminism for its portrayal of women as 'victims' and contends that 'we' – read wealthy, healthy, white, straight, college-educated women – should construct a 'feminism' that celebrates 'our' power.⁴⁷ The structural analysis of oppression, exploitation and the responsibility of the overempowered to the disempowered is entirely foreclosed. This evisceration of feminism will only encourage more and more white wealthy women to look out for their own interests – and to invoke the name of 'feminism' when it suits them in doing so – and to forget the needs of disadvantaged women. In concrete terms, we should remember that several of the women elected to the House of Representatives with support from feminist political action committees voted for the welfare bill that is going to condemn over a million additional children to poverty and throw millions of poor mothers with no childcare, no job training, and no job prospects off the welfare rolls.⁴⁸ This displacement of radical democratic feminism by non-feminisms or even anti-feminisms that masquerade as feminism could not be more disastrous, especially now as automation and globalization ensure economic

opportunities for a small highly educated elite – which includes many college-educated white women – and increasing exploitation for the rest.

The anti-feminist feminism of Paglia, Hoff Sommers, and Roiphe⁴⁹ has also emerged as a popular intellectual school. These ‘theories’ attack virtually every feminist position but borrow liberal individualist feminist rhetoric such that they can represent themselves as more ‘democratic’ and more ‘feminist’ than feminism. Many younger women are strongly attracted to them, and to Wolf’s so-called ‘power feminism’, because of their apparent irreverence. These discourses have been masterfully constructed as the rebellious underdog voices against an omnipotent ‘Goliath’ – the mythical ‘feminist establishment’ – when they are, of course, serving the hegemonic neo-conservative and anti-feminist forces quite nicely. And, because neo-conservative values predominate in American academia, students are not being given the critical tools that are needed to evaluate these texts and are therefore vulnerable to their false promises of rebellion.

In an instrumentalist sense – and I don’t think that our instrumentalist interests should be used to define the totality of legitimate feminist discourse – I have argued that we need to develop much more sophisticated analyses of power and the neutralizing effects of ideological appropriations. Since Britain’s Labour Party leadership has distanced itself from its progressive grassroots and the trade-union movement at every opportunity, this theoretical and political problem has now become an urgent priority on both sides of the Atlantic.

Notes

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8. T. Purdum, ‘The Second Clinton Term: Promise, Pitfalls and Perils’, *New York Times*, 6 November 1996, p. B2.
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12. D. Corn, ‘What’s Left in the Party?’, *The Nation*, 23 September 1996, p. 20.
13. B. Ehrenreich, ‘Frances Fox Piven’, *The Progressive*, November 1996, p. 34.
14. Pollitt, ‘We Were Wrong’, p. 9.
15. *New York Times*, ‘States’ Wrongs on Abortion’, editorial, 3 September 1996, p. 22.
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22. D. Kirp, ‘Politics Out of the Closet’, *The Nation*, 9–16 September 1996, pp. 3–4.
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 26. C. Buci-Glucksmann, 'State, Transition and Passive Revolution', in C. Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979, pp. 216–17, 224; C. Mouffe, 'Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci', in Mouffe, ed., *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, p. 182; E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, Verso, London, 1977, p. 161; A.M. Smith, 'Why Did Army Apologize? Hegemony, Homophobia and the Religious Right', in A. Ansell, ed., *Discourses of Divisiveness: The Agenda of the Conservative Movement*, Westview Press, New York, forthcoming.
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 28. Buci-Glucksmann, 'State, Transition and Passive Revolution', pp. 228–9; Mouffe, 'Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci', pp. 182–3.
 29. E. Laclau, 'Power and Representation', in E. Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, London, 1996, p. 99.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 100; C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, Verso, London, 1993, pp. 4, 6.
 31. E. Laclau, 'Community and Its Paradoxes', in Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 120–21.
 32. With voting participation rates of about 45 per cent in non-presidential elections, and between 48.8 per cent (1996) and 55.2 per cent (1992) in presidential elections, the USA is the least participatory democracy in the world. Steinem notes that 70–80 per cent of the members of right-wing extremist groups cast ballots in every election, and that American voters routinely make up their minds based on their vague perceptions of a candidate's image rather than accurate knowledge about his or her actual positions. Fewer than 10 per cent of the voters in 1994 had even heard of Gingrich's extremist Contract With America, and fewer than 1 per cent could identify one of its goals (Steinem, 'Voting as Rebellion', p. 56). In the 1994 election, there was a sharp decline in the turnout of low-income voters. Sixty per cent of American voters with incomes of more than \$50,000 went to the polls, an increase of almost one percentage point from the turnout in 1990. For voters with incomes under \$5,000, the turnout was only 19.9 per cent, down from 32.2 per cent. The decrease in turn-out of voters with incomes between \$5,000 and \$10,000 was from 30.9 per cent in 1990 to 23.3 per cent in 1994. The proportion of voters from the highest income groups as compared to the total voting population rose from 18 per cent in 1990 to 23.4 per cent in 1994. Turnout rates for the eligible electorate as a whole in congressional elections that do not include a presidential race are relatively stable – 46 per cent in 1986, 45 per cent in 1990 and 44.6 per cent in 1994. It is only in the distribution of voters according to income that sharp transitions in turnout are taking place. According to Gans of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, the data suggests that upper-income voters 'saw an opportunity for the Republicans to get in' and responded ('Low-Income Voters' Turnout Fell in 1994, Census Reports', *New York Times*, 11 June 1995, p. 22). Only 27 per cent of eligible voters with incomes less than \$15,000 voted in 1994 (A. Keyssar, 'Keep Out the Vote', *The Nation*, 11 November 1996, p. 6). In 1992, 54 per cent of participating voters were women, as opposed to 51 per cent in 1994 (R. Toner, 'Parties Pressing to Raise Turnout as Election Nears', *New York Times*, 27 October 1996, p. 28). The voter turnout in 1996, 48.8 per cent, was the lowest since 1924. Analysts are divided as to whether Clinton's commanding lead over Dole or the nature of the campaign itself is to blame for voter apathy.
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 36. D. Corn, 'The Fix Ain't In', *The Nation*, 7 October 1996, p. 5.
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 39. R. Borosage, 'Toward Democratic Renewal', *The Nation*, 9–16 September 1996, p. 20.
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 46. Z. Eisenstein, *Hatreds*, Routledge, New York, 1996.
 47. N. Wolf, *Fire With Fire*, Random House, New York, 1993.
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