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# Postmodern neoliberal discourses vs postfeminist theories and practices

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the article is considered the conceptual reconstruction of the relationship between postmodern feminism and the notional field of contemporary neoliberalism. The analytical methods used were based on the assertion that the complexity of textual interventions requires interdisciplinary approaches. The findings and results of the research carried out accentuate that COVID-19 has contributed greatly to the contradictions of the current global

landscape in the contexts of neoliberalism and feminism. Feminism asserts as a discourse that the conceptual apparatus of neoliberalism has not served its goals; in fact, postfeminism has not yet chosen its route in the neoliberal context. The assumption that women cannot win their "vindication battle" in the world where "the game is fixed" continues to be taken as an axiom, even though the coronavirus pandemic causes some observers to proclaim the return of influential governments and social contracts. The latter accentuates the role of female representation in neoliberal social, cultural, and political discourses at the global level.

**Keywords:** life world; virtual economies; problematization of theory; social construction; pop-culture.

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# Discursos neoliberales posmodernos frente a teorías y prácticas posfeministas

#### Resumen

El objetivo del artículo se considera la reconstrucción conceptual de la relación entre el feminismo posmoderno y el campo nocional del neoliberalismo contemporáneo. Los métodos analíticos empleados se basaron en la afirmación de que la complejidad de las interpretaciones textuales exige los enfoques interdisciplinarios. Los hallazgos y resultados de la investigación realizada acentúan que el COVID-19 ha contribuido en gran medida a las contradicciones del panorama mundial actual en los contextos del neoliberalismo y del feminismo. El feminismo afirma como discurso que el aparato conceptual del neoliberalismo no ha servido a sus objetivos; de hecho, el postfeminismo aún no ha elegido su ruta en el contexto neoliberal. La suposición de que las mujeres no pueden ganar su "batalla reivindicativa" en el mundo donde "el juego está arreglado" se sigue tomando como un axioma, a pesar de que la pandemia de coronavirus hace que algunos observadores proclamen el regreso de los gobiernos influyentes y los contratos sociales. Esto último acentúa el papel de la representación femenina en los discursos sociales, culturales y políticos neoliberales a nivel global.

**Palabras clave**: mundo de la vida; economías virtuales; problematización de la teoría; construcción social; cultura pop.

#### Introduction

The list of radical changes, which have been wrought in the "postmodern condition," makes scientists conceive late modernity as a dramatic period with a number of significant shifts. In the Western world those changes are both symbolic and real-life, embracing the problematization of the philosophic absolutes against the background of renouncing abstract models and modes that have been applied for thousands of years. Scientific legitimation of the "post-Brave New world" requires the development of the conceptual apparatus for understanding and explaining collective and individual experiences of man/woman in the problematic fields of postmodernity. The contradictory "web" of the social, political and economic picture of our days is represented in the context of the dominating influence of two key factors: "new popular culture" and "new cyberspace" of massmedia expansion, with the focus on their aggressive attitudes towards the "public" and the "individual".

"Life world" ("Lebenswelt" to E. Husserl) of our day-to-day experience

can be represented nowadays as a kind of universal horizon covering chaos of non-science-conscious reflection, without the burden of scientific concepts and notions in the minds of "ordinary" people, - men and women, in their own subjective interpretation. "Life world" is extremely important in the postmodern context of "hyper-intensification of modernism" with its loads of facts and metaphors providing much material for comprehension of the postmodern "landscape". Still the fact is that "life world" is an initial stage of any comprehension, a kind of "matrix", which stipulates all the branches of the Theory (Svasyan, 2010: 60). The confusions and contradictions of the contemporary thought have become much more evident due to the current global pandemic situation with COVID-19, which has shown vividly "how the real world became a Fable", and what the realities of the social construction are at present (Schwab *et al.*, 2020).

Hence follows the importance of popular culture, its idols and ideas, its ideology including all the aspects of the postmodern life in the production of the "world picture", loaded with scientific concepts and the metaphorical "truths," which regulate individuals' relations to the surrounding world with the focus on the "must" to simulate the "objective essence" of the existence. The issue, which arises here, is referred to by postmodernists as the "problematization of theory". New cosmological ideas are making the world picture even more complicated, theology seems to add by concentrating on the particular religious issues, philosophy is, as a rule, engaged in the analysis of the cultural discourses, not being preoccupied with the metaphysics of absolutes. Political science provides quite a cluster of new research trends: political economy, institutional studies, social politics, neoliberalism, feminism and gender studies (the last two, being no doubt connected, are not at all synonyms). All mentioned above nowadays represents the development of the corresponding sub-branches of the political science in many countries, Ukraine included.

The increase of interest to these scientific fields testifies to the evident successful attempts of the Ukrainian political science in its expansion into the Western "theory". Such research entails many interdisciplinary dialogues; in this particular article it means the analysis of the neoliberal theories and postfeminist agendas with the focus on understanding their interconnection and contradiction in the context of the current postmodern theoretical problematization.

### 1. Methods of research

With the focus on the complexity of the interpretation of the contemporary "world picture", the interdisciplinary approaches are considered of great significance. In order to develop the theoretical analysis and the conceptual

presentation of the given research material, some definite methods of the scientific investigation are also considered important. Here the deconstruction should be mentioned as the key principle of postmodernism. The phenomenological and existential approaches to the analysis are significant too as they help to stress the issue of the "human experience", which is valid in this investigation.

Hermeneutics, as the postmodernism theory of interpretation, also plays its role in this research. Applying the hermeneutic interpretation means the coordination of the different contexts presented in the article. The constructivist method permits to claim the social-cultural determination of the phenomena analyzed in the article. The logic of the hermeneutic interpretation in the aspects of the sociological discourse leads to the acknowledgment of the systematic approach used in order to escape the simplified treatment of the definite socio-cultural facts and phenomena. On the whole, this scientific paper advocates interdisciplinary dialogue, which is considered absolutely necessary as it reflects the postmodernist idea of epistemological pluralism.

## 2. Neoliberal conceptualization of postmodern discourses

Neoliberal conceptualization of political, cultural, and economic discourses in postmodern neoliberalism is considered by theorists as a kind of "generalized term". While mainly treating this term as "a theory of political, economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom" (Harvey, 2007: 2), scientists accentuate that neoliberalism is a key to the postmodern political, social, cultural, and economic transformations. Among many definitions of neoliberalism there are such, in which the focus is on the "market" and "trade" (Harvey, 2007: 2). On the other hand, the tendency is evident to oppose neoliberalism to liberalism primarily in their connection to the market. Speaking about "a vision of capitalism" F. Jameson claims that "the affirmation of the primacy of the market is sheer ideology" (2009: 211).

The liberal "consensus", which preceded neoliberal "skepticism", has been achieved, and, according to F. Fukuyama (2006), has been realized when America announced the victory of its principal free-market ideal. Postmodern researchers argue that namely postmodern ideas provide a valuable critique to Fukuyama's thesis, and pose the questions: can we talk about a universal and ideological history; a universal human nature, or an autonomous individual? The declaration of controversial ideas from the start provoked much debate. In 1994 J. Derrida set his deconstruction scheme as a binary opposition to Fukuyama and Modernist-enlightenment world (Sim, 1995).

It is stated that liberalism and social democracy tendencies went into the reverse course with the election of the Thatcher and Reagan governments. That era has been dominated since early 80s of the last century by the contemporary forms of neoliberalism - based "market fundamentalism", globalization and the ideology of "free trade". The postmodern scientists using the theoretical lens of M. Foucault's ideas of governmentality, understand it as a form of radical political economy, and criticize neoliberalism as the ruling "ideological consensus".

D. Harvey (2007: 3) claims that neoliberalism is the doctrine asserting that market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action. While the institutional framework is often mentioned too, it is stressed that state interventions into markets must be kept to a minimum, because the state cannot possess enough information as for the market signals powerful interest groups will inevitably distort state intentions. Still D. Harvey (2007: 7) is sure that the conceptual apparatus of neoliberalism represents concepts of dignity and individual freedom. His assumption is that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market, and this is a cardinal feature of neoliberalism.

Some researchers' approaches to neoliberalism accentuate its cultural implications. Embracing the complexity of neoliberalism and the corresponding difficulty to comprehend it, J. Gilbert (2016) constructs a vision of the ways neoliberalism is represented in a full scope of cultural life. The scientist claims that the possible ways to understand neoliberalism include viewing it as a discoursive formation, an ideology, a hegemonic project of ideas, techniques, and technologies, as what Deleuze and Guattari call "abstract machine".

As "reality is made up of the Absolute and Causality" (Y. Gonzalez), we should put some accent on the "concept," its role and significance in postmodernism. In our instance, it is the philosophic evolution of how G. Deleuze represents transition from one concept to another. For him, philosophy means creation of concepts, in his view, the history of philosophy is the history of concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009). G. Deleuze and F. Guattari create a concept of the "abstract machine". The preceding concept of "trans-semiotics" allows Deleuze and Guattari to claim that not the signs refer to the language, which forms the structural and generating abstract machine. On the contrary, the language itself refers to the regimes of the signs. That is why trans-semiotics represents the abstract machine, which operates not with the "essences", but with the "matters". Thus, we cannot use the categories of the form and the essences to the abstract machine (Dyakov, 2013).

In the view of all said above the comparison made by J. Gilbert looks quite provocative. To our mind, it means that an answer to neoliberalism cannot be some other ideology, because it is not pure ideology, which is quite disputable. Some researchers maintain that there is an "answer" to neoliberalism, and it means democracy (Davis, 2017: XI). However, the definition that appears later in the book, cited here, states that neoliberalism is the elevation of market-based principles to the level of state-endorsed norms (Davis, 2017: XI).

Another interesting assertion, made by W. Davis, is about disenchantment of policies by economics. The example, provided by the scientist, seems quite valid: the economic crisis of 2008 was separated from the political one at the beginning, but the Brexit reference was a kind of eruption – the long awaited politization of the crisis.

Psychological pain, which many people suffered during that period, is not separated from the physical pain concept, writes the theorist, asserting that "pain" has become far more wide-spread in neoliberal societies: "Brexit and Trump supporters both have an above-average tendency to support the death penalty" (Davis, 2017: VIII). Summing it up, W. Davis comes to the conclusion that neoliberalism is "a moral economic system", which provides power to the most competitive people and institutions.

The fact is that it has become a target (rationally or not) for the vast number of people that made them suffer not only from the pain of defeat, they were punished for that defeat politically and economically (Davis, 2017: VIII). Since its entry on the world stage COVID-19 has dramatically torn up the existing script of how to govern countries. The paradoxical nature of neoliberalism is represented in the following situation: the dominating role of monopolies, banks and other "principal players" in the neoliberal society along with the decreasing role of states and their institutions should have led to the prosperity of the citizens – free individuals in the free market relations.

In fact, the aim of neoliberalism – absolute freedom of market and trade – has given the reverse result: the aggravating decrease of economic indices. The pandemic with its great impact on the five main categories – the economic, the societal, the geopolitical, the environmental, and the technological – has proposed "the reset", the new conceptual framework with three defining characteristics of today's world: interdependence, velocity, complexity, and – what is of great importance - the return of "big government" and the social contract (Schwab *et al.*, 2020).

As the key dimension of neoliberalism is competition per se, it should be noted that this principle seems a bit "cumbersome", rising much misunderstanding and confusion in the minds of ordinary people. The essential change that has recently happened is quite evident to the category of "ordinary citizens": bankers, hedge-fund owners have detached their activities from the real world. Instead of being a "service industry," banking became a closed system, which has no social value. This phenomenon has not only been analyzed by scientists, but it has also been depicted by the authors of the "serious novels" and mass culture products (e.g. in the popular "Billions", produced by Showtime (2016-2021). One of the main characters of the novel "A Week in December" by S. Faulks, a hedge-fund billionaire's wife, a psychologist, and a lawyer by education, thinks about what is happening:

Profit was no longer related to growth or increase, but became self-sustaining; and in this semi-virtual world, the amount of money to be made by financiers also become unhitched from normal logic. It followed... that the people who could flourish here must themselves be in some profound and personal way, detached..., they did take precautions to minimize the possibility of any contact with reality... However, it remained necessary for these people to have – or to develop very quickly – a limited sense of "the other"; a kind of functional autism was the ideal state of mind (Faulks, 2010: 102-103).

It is obvious that if neoliberalism is an "ethic" in itself, it is quite a special kind of ethic. And it is not only about the crisis of the philosophy absolutes, it means something different, a kind of new realization of the "old" binary oppositions. G. Gonzalez writes that people are special insofar they access the higher aspects of the absolutes, the classical philosophic conception of Truth, Love, Compassion, Altruism, etc. The absolutes have their oppositions in the classical dichotomies: Evil, Falsehood, Greed, Lust, Hate, Self-centeredness, Conceit, etc. Predicting society on what scientists consider the lower aspect of the absolutes, results in personal and social dysfunction, and consequently – in the end of civilization (Gonzalez, 2019).

# 3. The neoliberal discourses and narratives vs the postfeminist theories and practices

If the thesis is true that postcapitalist "logic" and neoliberal "ethic" generate psychological and cultural pressure resulting in negative effects on individuals, it is worth addressing it with the examples of discourses of postfeminism and the narratives of the contemporary popular culture. As the key dimension of neoliberalism is the ethos of competitiveness, the women's place "in the market" and "around the market" is obviously disadvantageous from the "start". It is well-known that liberal feminism is deeply rooted in modernity as a project of emancipation. In the feminism "dilemma" of two main conceptual directions. The feminist emancipation political activity has depended on the "linear purposeful time", in which the historical achievements of one generation are passed to the next one. As scientists' comment, this is the modernist historical mode, in which the definite acts of self-realization make the realization of the initial objectives and ideals possible (Appignanesi and Garratt, 2006: 202). To our mind, feminism is a good example of a long-term emancipational target, though it is problematic, whether it is "guaranteed" by historical progress.

No doubt, some recent economic and political trends vividly testify that feminism has successfully realized some (though not all) its goals. At present the feminist "mainstream" includes governmental programs, grant projects, funds' support. The programs and projects can be motivated by feminism and gender theories, though quite often in the asymmetrical way, with the obvious bias towards gender ideology and practices. When in the West it is governmentally accentuated that women live in the "aftermath" of feminism because now they enjoy the "long-sought" equality with men, it is often implicitly meant to say to the women living in the West: "You should remember, how lucky you are! ` Indeed, according to the Forbes ratings, annually the number of women, who increase their wealth, is constantly grows (with the exception of 2017).

If in 2018 the Forbes included only 91 ladies in its rating of billionaires, in 2019 this number was 243, in 2021 it is 328 women. The first position in the list of women- billionaires (the 15th in the overall list of 2019) is occupied by Francoise Bettencourt Meyers, the co-owner of L'Oréal. Her mother Liliane, who died not long ago, had kept the first position in this "female list" for many years. Alice Walton, the co-owner of Walmart, occupies the second position, and Jaqueline Mars —from Mars Inc.— the next. In the biographies of all those women, notwithstanding their personal abilities and capabilities, there is "old money", which is one more proof of the old proverb "wealth begets wealth".

Then what about the competition? Are millions of ordinary women can be considered "losers"? Neoliberalism with its focus on "market" and "competition" in fact increases inequalities, especially in the economy and as a result undermines democracy, because democratic state is replaced by market principles in the organization of major services. This problematic situation lies in the classical dichotomy "to be – to seem". Feminists address the public and governmental organizations with the motto "Stop pretending!

The Global Gender Gap Index, according to the version of World Economic Forum (The Global Gender Gap Report), shows that the index of not below 0,8 represents countries: Iceland (0,858), Norway (0,835), Sweden (0,822), Finland (0,821), Nicaragua (0,809), Rwandan (0,804). In the list, mentioned above, Ukraine occupies № 65 (0,708) (Global Gender Gap Index, 2020).

At the average level and in the global context, women take 22% of people's representatives in the national parliaments. Three countries of the EU have the gender parity (50:50): Sweden, France and Slovenia. In Ukraine the percentage of women in Verhovna Rada is 20,56% (06.01.2020). According to "Finance and Development" report (March, 2019) in 149 countries, which were under analysis, there were 17 women heads of states, 18% – ministers, 24% – parliament members. Only in 60%

of these countries' women have the same access to the financial services as men; in 42 of them women have the same possibilities for land ownership as men. Professionally, women are most of all engaged in health care and educational work: as for technologies the situation shows gender trouble": globally 22% of women are specialists in the field of the artificial intellect, correspondingly, men -78%.

Feminist scientists claim that taking into consideration all said above. gender equality cannot be achieved in the nearest hundred years. Without the aim of going into detail of the sociological aspects, we would like to give some more information about the gender statistics concerning the higher educational establishments in Ukraine. At present, there are about 1500 educational establishments of the four levels of accreditation, and less than a third of them are managed by women as principals, which concerns mainly colleges. As for the universities, there are only 53 women, who are rectors of the academies and universities. As a rule, the `glass ceiling` stops the careers of women at the level of the heads of the departments. The situation in the Academy of Sciences is even worse, among 342 Corresponding Members of the Academy there are 30 women, and that vividly shows that in the nearest 10-15 years the gender tendencies in the academic science will not change (Gender in detail, 2020). All this is valid evidence that neoliberal state policy, which at present is often represented as a libertarian one, has not changed yet, - there are valid gender inequalities in the institutional domains of economy, political life and academic science.

Of course, there have been some attempts to incorporate feminist problems within neoliberal project, but as the recent discourses show, such new forms mainly embrace "genders"; in general, individualism and sexuality. If we do not touch "genders," the number of which is growing with every year, and concentrate on women, we cannot but state that the neoliberal focus of attention has drifted in the direction of "femininities" (in plural), no doubt, in close connection with sexualities (in plural). Generally speaking, the interest for femininity seems to be, as it has been up to now, in the spheres of gender and cultural studies, with some more evident accent on popular culture. At present scientists accentuate the ways in which experiences and representation of femininity are changing, and try to analyze the possibilities for producing "new femininity".

Some of them even announce the "impossibility of femininity" (Allan, 2010). J. J. Halberstam writes that new (neoliberal) femininity does not simply connect people and concepts, the rise of Lady Gaga and her fame is a hint at new formulations of gender politics for a new generation: "This feminism is invested in innovative deployments of femininity and finds them to be well represented by pop performances, characterized by their ecstatic embrace of loss of control, a maverick sense of bodily identity" (Halberstam, 2012; XIII).

This mode of neoliberal tendencies has been discussed by J. Butler, J. Scott and other outstanding feminist scientists. The main idea is that through instrumentality feminist ideals are seized in control by governments and agencies of the state in order to pursue a completely different agenda (Butler, 2006). It is apparent that Butler asserts the thought that capitalism, certainly in its neoliberal form, is failing to provide a liveable life for the majority of human beings (Butler, 2018).

As for the ideology of the neoliberal "new femininities", researchers point out that the Internet and mass-media with other popular culture resources have created the space for sexualities that borrow its vocabulary from the world of pornography and sex industry (Gill, 2011).

#### Conclusion

At present, feminism recognizes that the neoliberal world has changed the agenda of the classical liberal feminism, which was shaped by capitalism and rooted in modernity. Its emancipational goals have been drifting from the "liberation of the oppressed" and consequently, from neomarxist theories, which were very influential in the second wave of feminism (M. Barret, L. Vogel, G. Spivak et al.), towards understanding the fact that the "late capitalism" phase has finished, that the conceptual apparatus of neoliberalism – concepts of dignity and individual freedom of the market have failed to serve the objectives of the classical feminism.

Postfeminism in the neoliberal context has not chosen its new route yet, however, what is comprehended and represented as the truth is a supposition that women cannot win their battle under the neoliberal conditions where, in fact, the "the game is fixed" by monopolies, hedgefunds, and such like "movers and shakers" of the new neoliberal world where governments have resigned themselves to their decreasing role in the state support of those social groups, which must be supported in the democratic regimes.

In general, the context is becoming increasingly hostile to the practical realization of the feminist targets: neoliberal turn poses threats to feminism in the classical agenda of achieving gender equality. With the evident crisis of classical feminism, "management" of social relations prove that the traditional modes of production have been changed, while women are still mainly engaged in the "reproduction" sphere, though with changed narratives and implicitly different accents, - e.g. the pandemic of COVID-19 has vividly demonstrated that the social value of an experienced nurse is much higher than the role of a billionaire, the owner of a hedge fund. Speaking about hi-tech branches of production, it is necessary to stress that the percentage of women engaged in hypermodern production spheres is extremely little.

What is said in mass-media, what is seen in the TV shows and TV series, what is visible on the "screens" in its meanings makes evident that the dematerialization of the real is reflected in the popular culture narratives, that the Western world's media representation of women often borrows its vocabulary from the pornography and sex industry.

The dichotomy of "to be and to seem" is vividly illustrated by the recent phenomenon of "#MeToo". On the one hand, postfeminism is an extremely active in the struggle with all forms of sexual harassment, on the other, — it looks like the neoliberal conceptualization of the ideology of new femininities. The problem of woman's subjectivity is reflected both in high culture and in its pop-version, as it is revealed in many other real-life instances, in which woman as a subject does not always act in her own interest in the context of the de-democratizational processes of current neoliberalism.

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