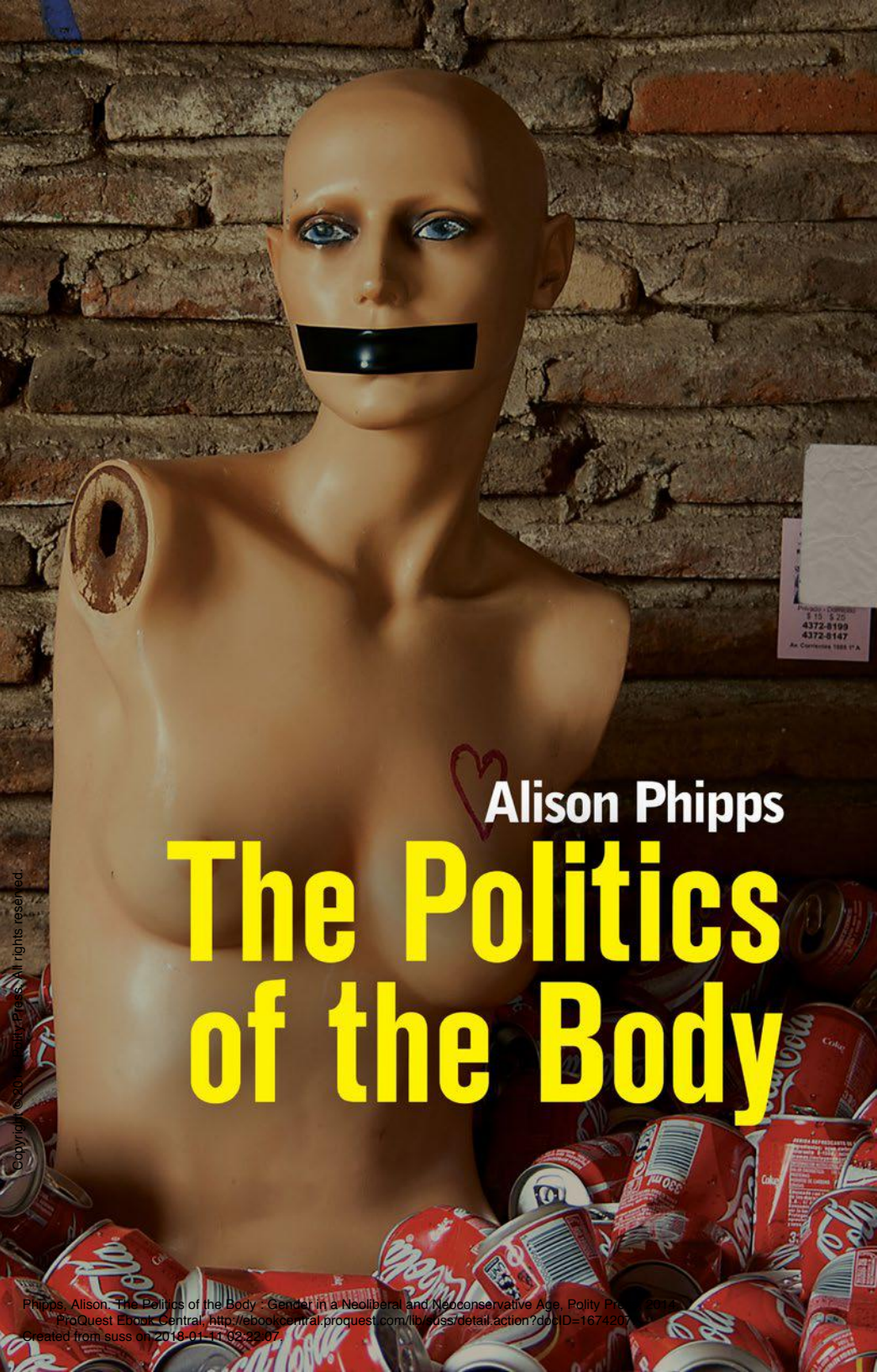

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The Politics of the Body

The Politics of the Body

Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age

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Sexual Violence and the Politics of Victimhood

> The DSK case and the Assange case have brought to the fore the true ugliness of sex negative feminism and man hatred, and the extent to which they made inroads into our culture and society just as insidious as the right-wing propaganda of the Murdochs. They have also shown how those right wing forces can so easily hijack stupid blinkered man haters to the right-wing agenda.
>
> (Craig Murray 2011)

The fact that powerful men sometimes exploit and abuse women and girls is not particularly shocking. As I write this book, the media brims with such stories, ranging from the continual speculation over the on–off and physically violent relationship between American pop stars Rihanna and Chris Brown, to the recent revelations about extensive and systematic abuse of teenage girls in 1970s Britain by DJ and television presenter Jimmy Savile and others associated with the BBC. There is a narrative of outrage in contemporary western tabloid media and popular culture around such cases, particularly those which involve the sexualization and abuse of girls. The three cases I cover in this chapter, however, are antithetical to this, characterized by contention and debate,

censure and defence. I discuss WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, both accused of sexual assault, and film-maker Roman Polanski, convicted of unlawful sex with a minor. I do not wish to rehearse the rights and wrongs of these matters: instead, my focus is encapsulated by the chapter's opening quote, taken from the blog of left-wing dissident and human rights campaigner Craig Murray. For Murray, Assange was the victim of feminist misandry, allied with a right-wing witch-hunt; Strauss-Kahn and Polanski were similarly positioned by their supporters within broader conspiratorial narratives which often eclipsed discussion of the cases themselves. I examine the support given to all three men, drawing out common themes and contextualizing these within the dominant neoliberal/neoconservative framework and prevailing political positionings and sensitivities, such as the backlash against feminism and the leftist critique of US neo-imperialist projects. I argue that these conditions of possibility framed the politicking around these cases, producing rape apologism and victim-blaming from a variety of quarters. Throughout the chapter, these case studies are used to raise questions about the constraints on sexual violence activism created by the contemporary lexicon.

WikiLeaks, founded in 2006, is an organization and website publishing secret information, news leaks and classified information from anonymous news sources and whistle-blowers. Following a number of releases of information pertaining to the US-led 'war on terror', in 2010 the organization collaborated with major global media outlets to release a large collection of diplomatic cables. Soon afterwards, its Australian founder Julian Assange was arrested in the United Kingdom in relation to allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women in Sweden. Since he had previously had consensual sex with both women, their complaints were immediately positioned within the sometimes controversial paradigm of 'date rape', a term which has been criticized for minimizing the experiences of women who are attacked by someone they know (the majority of sexual violence cases) (McColgan 1996). The substance of the allegations was this: the first plaintiff claimed that during one act of intercourse Assange

had used his body weight to hold her down and, despite being asked to, had not used a condom, and that on another occasion he had molested her by pressing his erect penis against her body. The second claimed that he had engaged in intercourse with her while she was asleep, again without using any protection. After a prolonged legal battle, in 2012 Assange lost his appeal against extradition to Sweden to face questioning. He immediately fled to the Ecuadorean Embassy in London, where he was granted asylum on humanitarian grounds. He was backed by a broad coalition of journalists, political figures, activists and celebrities, many located on the Left and almost all inspired by the belief that the matter was part of a larger neoconservative persecution of a prominent dissident and a plot to eventually extradite him to the United States to face charges relating to WikiLeaks.[1] These supporters used a variety of strategies including questioning the seriousness of the charges, naming the complainants and undermining their integrity by suggesting that they were politically or emotionally motivated and had made false or exaggerated statements.

The broad left-wing support for Assange brought to mind the earlier case of Roman Polanski, a Polish-French producer, writer, director and actor who has made a string of internationally acclaimed films. Polanski was similarly widely defended after being arrested in 2009 in Switzerland at the request of US authorities, en route to accept a lifetime achievement award at the Zurich Film Festival. However, unlike Assange, Polanski had actually been convicted of a sexual offence. In 1977, he had been arrested in the United States for the sexual abuse of a 13-year-old girl, Samantha Gailey (now Geimer), who alleged that he had provided her with champagne and a sedative and performed oral, vaginal and anal sex upon her without her consent. Polanski insisted that the acts had been consensual, and as part of a plea bargain (designed to protect Gailey from a trial) in which five of six counts of criminal behaviour were dismissed, pleaded guilty to the charge of unlawful sex with a minor. However, before being sentenced, he fled to his home in London and eventually settled in France with the case still unresolved. Arrested again more than thirty years later, Polanski was incarcerated near Zurich for two months, then placed

under house arrest at his home in Gstaad while, like Assange, he fought extradition (in this case to the United States). In summer 2010, the Swiss government rejected the extradition request and declared Polanski a free man. Although there are important differences between this case and that of Assange (most importantly the fact that Polanski had been convicted of a sex crime), there were striking similarities in the arguments used to support him. A group of film industry figures and others rallied around the director, positioning him as the victim of a vengeful US criminal justice system and questioning the gravity of his crime. There were also suggestions (implicit too in the case of Assange), that his status as a revered icon should entitle him to leniency.

Requests for special treatment, among other themes, link these two men with French Socialist Party politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn, arrested in 2011 for the attempted rape of a housekeeping worker in a Manhattan hotel. Like the others, Strauss-Kahn maintained that he had engaged in consensual sexual relations with the complainant: however, he subsequently resigned his position as head of the International Monetary Fund after a string of similar allegations from women in France and overseas (BBC News 2011b; Cochrane 2011). Although Strauss-Kahn was not as widely defended as Assange or Polanski, he nevertheless enjoyed a great deal of support from the French left-wing political elite, especially after doubts emerged about his accuser's credibility (BBC News 2011a). The charges against him were eventually dismissed, although his complainant, alongside a French journalist who had alleged an attempted rape in 2003, subsequently initiated a civil case which was settled out of court (Fine 2012; Moynihan 2012). In 2012, Strauss-Kahn was investigated in France in relation to involvement in a prostitution ring (Moynihan 2012). At the time of his 2011 arrest, he was tipped to be the next Socialist Party president of France: advocates argued that due to this elevated status, he should not be treated as a subject of justice like any other. Like the other two cases, there were also attempts to smear his accusers through raising questions about their sexual histories, honesty and motivations.

The discussion in this chapter is not about the guilt or innocence of Julian Assange, Dominique Strauss-Kahn or Roman

Polanski. Indeed, many of their supporters did not debate this, instead arguing that, regardless of any wrongdoing, they should be entitled to particular consideration. I raise questions here about who supported them and why, what discourses and rhetorics were employed, and what this reveals about contemporary politics and the possibilities for feminism and sexual violence activism. I attempt to illuminate several elements of what I see as a new orthodoxy: a suspicion of victimhood and a reluctance to moralize which merge well with neoliberal individualism, produced at least partly in response to the focus on pathological predators and criminal justice solutions which speaks to the power of neoconservative 'law and order' mentalities. The various sections of this chapter deal with a number of common themes in the three case studies: the neoliberal 'meritocracy' which has augmented the rights of powerful men to act with impunity and attendant politics of personal responsibility which has exacerbated victim-blaming, and the rather uncomfortable association between neoconservative morality and radical feminism which has shaped an answering left-wing discomfort in relation to the politics of victimhood and morality. Underpinning all this is the postmodern turn in academia and cultural commentary and two related backlashes: the first against feminism and the second against the United States. Together, I argue, these factors have produced a dismissal of the experience of sexual violence and a gender-blindness and rape apologism which can be extant on the Left as well as on the Right.

Contemporary 'meritocracy': neoliberalism and celebrity culture

The most obvious factor uniting all three of these cases in this chapter is the suggestion from supporters that such successful and powerful men had earned the right to be treated differently from everyone else. For example, after Polanski's arrest, a transnational group of more than a hundred film-makers, actors and producers signed a petition urging his release. This list included luminaries and recognized left-wingers such as Woody Allen, Martin Scorcese,

David Lynch, Milan Kundera, Tilda Swinton, Wes Anderson, Natalie Portman, Harrison Ford, Isabelle Huppert, Jeremy Irons, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Salman Rushdie, Diane von Furstenberg, Isabelle Adjani and Pedro Almodovar. A number of organizations also endorsed the petition, including ABC distribution, the Cannes Film Festival and Pathé. It was coordinated from France by the SACD, an organization which represents performance and visual artists (Knegt 2009). The demand for Polanski's release was based on one key argument: that his artistry was evidence of his irreproachability and had earned him the right to clemency (Bennett 2010). The text began as follows:

> We have learned the astonishing news of Roman Polanski's arrest by the Swiss police on September 26, upon arrival in Zurich while on his way to a film festival where he was due to receive an award for his career in film-making. His arrest follows an American arrest warrant dating from 1977 against the film-maker, in a case of morals. Roman Polanski is a French citizen, a renowned and international artist now facing extradition. This extradition, if it takes place, will be heavy in consequences and will take away his freedom. Film-makers, actors, producers and technicians – everyone involved in international film-making – want him to know that he has their support and friendship. (Soares 2013)

The opening sentence established that it was 'astonishing' for a person of Polanski's consequence to be arrested: 'apprehended like a common terrorist', wrote French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy (Bennett 2010). The subsequent reference to the case as one of 'morals' suggested that a man such as this ought to be considered above parochial concerns. The significance of Polanski's artistic contribution appeared to dwarf his crime: in his 2009 memoir, Australian author and broadcaster Clive James mused, 'I couldn't help feeling that we were all better off if a man like that was living in comfort near the Avenue Montaigne rather than bouncing off the walls in Chino prison' (Deacon 2009).

Polanski is one of a number of celebrities who have generated publicity for violating statutory rape laws. Others include R&B

singers R Kelly (who topped the charts in 2003 while on bail for 21 counts of statutory rape and child pornography) and Akon, and actors Woody Allen, Kelsey Grammer and Rob Lowe (Koon-Magnin 2008: 2; Malkin 2003). None of these men has served a custodial sentence. Morton (2005: 365) writes, 'sometimes it must seem to the layman that the ordinary rules of law and evidence do not apply when a celebrity . . . is the defendant in a criminal trial.' Instead, it appears that celebrity mitigates an offence or diminishes the need for justice. In Polanski's case, his behaviour was constructed as part of a broader artistic nonconformism (see, for example, Porton 2012). Lévy opined that writers and artists 'often have bad reputations . . . it's not important for them to look good' (Bennett 2010). Interpreting the case in this way, as a mere matter of *perceived* impropriety, served to invisibilize the experience of the victim. Similarly, in the case of Assange, American sex worker activist and writer Tracy Quan (2010) stated that 'subversive guys with cavalier notions about female consent are nothing new', arguing that, in the 1960s, rape was seen by some on the Left as 'insurrectionary'.

Although Dominique Strauss-Kahn is not an artist, much of the support expressed for him was also underpinned by the belief that such a celebrated figure, this time in politics, was entitled to allowances under the law. Polanski supporter Lévy (2011) was again a prominent voice, condemning the American justice system for taking Strauss-Kahn for 'a subject of justice like any other'. Likewise, Nixon speechwriter-turned-actor Ben Stein (2011) argued that a man with such a distinguished record of public service should not have been incarcerated in the notoriously tough penitentiary on Rikers Island. The BBC ran the headline: 'IMF chief sent to tough NY jail' (Napier 2011) and a CNN banner read 'Dominique Strauss-Kahn: A brilliant career, a stunning accusation' (Silverleib 2011). Again, the connotation was that the 'brilliant' do not lower themselves to commit sex crimes, and that, if they do, they nevertheless ought to be set apart when they are dealt with. There was much critique in France of how the case was conducted in the days after Strauss-Kahn's arrest, with a widespread view that he should have been exempt from the customary

'perp walk' past the assembled press and the obligatory insulting headlines in the tabloids. In response to the fact that the New York City Police Department and media did not give him such special treatment, some French supporters presented Strauss-Kahn as a hero and martyr (Fraser 2011).

Finally, Julian Assange's attempts to circumvent due process and the broad support he received for these can be seen as evidence that both he and his supporters felt he should enjoy particular privileges due to his status within the anti-American Left (Green 2012). Upon arrest, Assange refused to be photographed, fingerprinted or to give a DNA sample, as is normally routine in such cases (Davies, Jones and Hirsch 2010). He also engaged, with high-profile backing from supporters such as left-wing journalists Michael Moore and John Pilger, socialist politicians George Galloway and Tony Benn (although Benn later retracted his support – see Liberal Conspiracy 2012), socialite and writer Jemima Khan, film directors Oliver Stone and Ken Loach, academics Tariq Ali and Noam Chomsky, and feminist Naomi Wolf, in a prolonged legal battle to fight extradition. In an interview published during his period of house arrest, Assange had elevated himself to the same status as acclaimed civil rights activist Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr, and maintained that his WikiLeaks work was too important to answer to 'random prosecutors around the world who simply want to have a chat' (Burns and Somiaya 2010). In fact, however, he was required for the purpose of conducting criminal proceedings: the arrest warrant had been issued with probable cause, but in Swedish law an indictment cannot be made until after interrogation has taken place (England and Wales High Court 2011). Nevertheless, and in an apparent misunderstanding of this, Assange and his supporters (a group which also included the campaigning organization Women Against Rape) advocated for him to be informally questioned by telephone or Skype (see, for example, Axelsson and Longstaff 2012).

The idea that the male elite should be able to act with impunity is by no means a new one: the persistence of this into the twenty-first century in democratic states can perhaps be attributed to the rise of celebrity culture and veneration of those who have achieved a certain level of fame and notoriety (Cashmore 2006).

We have seen this recently in the United Kingdom in the case of Jimmy Savile, who used his fame and power to serially abuse children, but this equally applies to the three cases covered in this chapter. This is partly due to a general trend in which the spheres of the media, the entertainment industry and the political have come to intersect (Marsh, Hart and Tindall 2010), creating a new aristocracy in the public gaze and imagination. As Choi and Berger (2010) contend, the apex of the social hierarchy is now reserved for celebrities: it could be argued that fame itself has now become a form of cultural capital and a marker of distinction (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), seen in the popularity of 'star search' television shows such as *American Idol* and *The X Factor*. The reach of celebrities has extended beyond the entertainment industry into arenas such as politics, health, philanthropy and religion: Choi and Berger (2010: 213) use the example of American actor Richard Gere, in a broadcast during the Palestinian presidential elections, stating, 'Hi, I'm Richard Gere, and I'm speaking for the entire world.' There are numerous illustrations of celebrity politicking in this chapter, and Assange in particular can be seen as a product of the corresponding trend for career politicians to become 'brands' (Marsh, Hart and Tindall 2010; Thebes 2012). This cult of stardom, together with the persistence of gendered 'rape myths' and a general failure to take violence against women as seriously as other crimes, connects Assange, Strauss-Kahn and Polanski with others who have similarly evaded justice for acts of gendered violence or have been feted despite them (Chris Brown, Charlie Sheen and Mike Tyson are good examples).

Celebrity culture is also perpetuated by a rather facile notion of meritocracy offering a free-market version of success and individualizing failure. This sits within a broader milieu in which neoliberal values such as competition, consumption and deregulation have moved out of the market and into our 'common sense' beliefs and subjectivities (Harvey 2005; Brown 2006). Applied to individual biographies, this brings a focus on personal responsibility, choice and agency. The neoliberal subject is autonomous, rational, risk managing and responsible for their own destiny (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This means that society's

'successes' are lauded for making the most of their opportunities: however, it also denotes that 'failures' are characterized as at best diffident and at worst lazy, and ultimately responsible for their fate (Harris 2003; Smart 2012). This market-political rationality (Brown 2006) marries well with the contemporary retreat from welfare provision in economic and social policy (Baker 2009). The influence of individualistic constructions is reflected in an extant popular and political distaste for social 'failures' who complain about their lot in life (markedly welfare recipients), framed by an 'anti-victim' politics and slew of cultural commentary. This will be discussed in more detail in the next sections of this chapter since, in all three of the case studies covered, it arguably intensified the victim-blaming which in any case continues to be rife in relation to incidents of sexual violence (Ullman 2010).

Blame the victim: rape myths persist

It is notable that support for all three men, from both ends of the political spectrum, was frequently expressed via questioning the complainants' stories and integrity (Harding 2010; McEwan 2010). Often this drew on now-familiar rape myths and victim-blaming tropes. In the case of Polanski, American actress Whoopi Goldberg asserted that his crime was not 'rape-rape' because alcohol and drugs had been involved; other allies pointed to the 13-year-old victim's previous sexual activity as a factor mitigating the crime (Chaudhry 2010; Clarke 2010). Assange complained that one of his accusers had been wearing a 'revealing pink sweater' (Miriam 2010). Together with his lawyers and other defenders, he made use of the term 'sex by surprise', incorrectly arguing that sex with someone who was sleeping was an act within the boundaries of normalcy which had been defined as rape by Sweden's over-stringent laws (Zeisler 2010). Perhaps most shocking were the opinions expressed by Assange advocate and American feminist Naomi Wolf, who not only opined that sex with a sleeping partner was not rape, but also ventured that an incident in which a woman

did not fight back against her assailant did not merit this definition. Furthermore, she claimed that the first complainant could not truly have been raped, as she continued to share Assange's bed after the alleged assault (Democracy Now 2010). These statements (for which she later apologized and appeared partially at least to retract – see Edinburgh Eye 2012) were incredible in their ignorance of the body of feminist research on 'rape myths', or fallacious beliefs which function to justify sexual violence and abuse (see, for example, Suarez and Gadalla 2010; Turchik and Edwards 2012). The myth that victims of sexual violence will either resist assault or immediately extricate themselves from an abusive situation is an enduring and particularly dangerous one since it relies on misunderstandings of the experience of sexual violence and the fear it instils, even in assaults which do not threaten or cause physical injury, and demonstrates a failure to appreciate the dynamics of abusive relationships.

Writing in the *Huffington Post*, Wolf had minimized the accusations against Assange, declaring Interpol, which had issued a 'red notice', or international wanted persons alert, to be nothing more than the 'dating police'. She also suggested that both complainants were simply attempting to deal with feelings of rejection caused by Assange's dissolute approach to relationships (Wolf 2010). This 'false accusation' trope, common in sexual violence cases, was also drawn upon by other supporters (Pollitt 2010). American left-wing activist Daniel Ellsberg (who had leaked classified documents relating to the Vietnam War in 1971) called the allegations 'false and slanderous', while British right-wing journalist Richard Pendlebury (2010) made much of the women's 'personal aggrieved feelings'. Some advocates went further, launching personal attacks upon the women in question and suggesting that they were pawns of the CIA or other neoconservative forces (Penny 2010; Rawlinson 2013). Libby Brooks, writing in the UK *Guardian*, commented that this focus on the women's integrity had united Assange's left-wing supporters with:

> a motley assemblage of conspiracy theorists and internet attack dogs that has been mauling the characters of Assange's accusers since their

> complaints were first lodged in August. Barely established online niceties regarding the discussion of sexual assault cases were overturned: the women's personal photographs, CVs and blogposts have been dredged for evidence of sexual deviance, mental instability and vengeful intent. (Brooks 2010)

The myth that women are highly likely to make false reports of sexual violence, persistent despite the evidence that this happens no more frequently than in any other type of crime (Saunders 2012), relies on reactionary gender stereotypes about the vindictive woman and the victimized man, as well as resting on the assumption that 'real rape' involves a pathological stranger and a virginal victim (Belknap 2012; Kelly 2012). It was remarkable to see, in the case of Assange, the perpetuation of this myth by those on the political Left.

In the case of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, such ideas were extremely pronounced, perhaps partly because the incident was intertwined with the politics of class and 'race'. Three months after the New York accusations emerged, prosecutors filed a recommendation for dismissal of the charges, due to inconsistencies in the complainant's story and other suggestions of untruthfulness, for instance on statements related to her tax records and, critically, her asylum application. As the case fell apart, a media frenzy began, with vilification proceeding from various quarters. For Ben Stein (2011), her occupation itself appeared to be a strike against her integrity: in a statement beginning rather incongruously, 'I love and admire hotel maids', he went on to say, 'I have had hotel maids that were complete lunatics, stealing airline tickets from me, stealing money from me, throwing away important papers, [and] stealing medications from me.' In the French left-wing press, where Strauss-Kahn was especially staunchly defended, the complainant's identity was leaked before she chose to reveal it herself. Lévy spoke of a noble man who had been the victim of a 'spiral of horror and calumny', and also attacked the French journalist who had accused Strauss-Kahn of attempted rape in 2003: in his words, she 'pretends to have been the victim of the same kind of attempted rape, [and] has shut up for eight years but, sensing the

golden opportunity, whips out her old dossier and comes to flog it on television.' American left-wing civil liberties lawyer Alan Dershowitz (2011) opined that the anonymity traditionally given to rape complainants should be withheld in order to make it possible to investigate their characters, seemingly in ignorance of the fact that 'rape shield laws' were originally instituted in order to protect plaintiffs from just this type of intrusive stigma (Call, Nice and Talarico 1991; Temkin 1995).

The attacks levelled at Strauss-Kahn's accuser also acquired a sexual nature, with the *New York Post* and other sources suggesting that she was a sex worker as well as a hotel housekeeper (Italiano 2011); an attempt to cast doubt upon her character which tapped into prevailing stigma surrounding sex workers and the common myth that, because they trade sex for money, they consent to all sexual acts (Phipps 2009). Beforehand, there had been suggestions in the press that Strauss-Kahn could be forgiven for mistaking the woman cleaning his room for a sex worker and therefore for assaulting her (Gira Grant 2011), which also drew upon class prejudice. An interview with a New York taxi driver was published in which he stated that she had 'big boobs and beautiful buttocks' (Cochrane 2011) as though this spoke to her sexual availability. Conversely, *Paris Match* ran quotes which negatively assessed her allure, and Strauss-Kahn's lawyers called her 'not very seductive' (Cochrane 2011), perpetuating the myth that only attractive women could be raped. There was a clear 'race' angle informing much of the reactionary politics: in *Le Parisien*, Lévy declared that Strauss-Kahn had been 'lynched' by the 'friends of [US] minorities', mobilizing neoconservative ideas of reverse discrimination and arguing that the poor, immigrant victim had been presumed innocent and the powerful politician had been assumed to be guilty (Chrisafis 2011a).

However, these elements of the case also appeared to inspire more left-wing support for Strauss-Kahn's complainant than either Assange's or Polanski's, especially in the United States. Her advocates highlighted a history of oppression and victimization, claiming that she had endured genital cutting and had been a child bride, and speculating that this had also been in a polygamous

marriage (Ellison 2011). They contended that any falsehoods told in relation to her asylum application and other affairs were merely a product of her disadvantaged social position and certainly did not cast doubt upon her credibility in the sexual assault case (Ensler 2011; Fine 2012). Taina Bien-Aimé, director of international human rights organization Equality Now, decried the way in which Strauss-Kahn's complainant had been put on trial by the world's media as though both parties in the case were equals. The matter became a metaphor for the global politics of oppression and privilege, discussed in relation to the plight of domestic workers in general (Romero 2012) and also as an emblem of whole populations and regions of the world which found themselves at a disadvantage: 'Strauss-Kahn and the maid [*sic*] have become archetypes – the oppressor versus the oppressed, players in a morality play that has riveted people on both sides of the Atlantic' (Ellison 2011). The positioning of Strauss-Kahn's accuser as oppressed and victimized by her ethnic background as well as the sexual assault is particularly interesting, given contemporary left-wing reluctance to emphasize victimhood in relation to cultural issues. However, the precedence of 'race' over gender in the left-wing reaction to the case is perhaps easier to understand, given that the backlash against feminism has touched the Left as well as the Right, whereas in contrast, contemporary left-wing multiculturalism and anti-racism have been strengthened by the neoconservative challenge.

Don't be a victim: the politics of personal responsibility

In all three cases, customary rape myths were augmented by a critique of the very notion of women's victimization, even from left-wing commentators. Writing on Strauss-Kahn, British journalist Deborah Orr (2011a) contended that viewing women as 'victims' of powerful men 'characterizes women as blank and passive, every bit as much as the pre-feminism credo that insisted that women did not really like sex at all. It must surely

be acknowledged that even women, we paragons of virtue, are capable of finding power, esteem and wealth to be sexually attractive.'

European sex radical Laura Agustin (2010), who was called as an expert witness in the Assange hearings, similarly argued that Swedish rape law positioned women as helpless victims and termed everything disagreeable rape and abuse. Naomi Wolf claimed that rape shield laws were Victorian relics which did not treat women as moral adults (Naomi Wolf 2011), associating the protection offered by anonymity with archaic notions of feminine helplessness rather than seeing it as a response to the stigma and risk that sexual violence complainants face. Comments such as this equated claiming victimization with abrogating one's agency, and set it against women's empowerment and sexual liberation. They can be seen as both reflecting recent developments in feminist thinking and shaped by a neoliberal individualism in which victimhood is seen as either an identity or a psychological state.

As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and others have argued, the contemporary self is a 'do-it-yourself' project: it can be made or unmade at will in a free market of endless opportunities. This 'meritocracy' produces disapproval of social 'failures' who are seen as lacking in entrepreneurial instinct and personal responsibility, and judged harshly if they complain. This rests upon a rather rudimentary transformation of ideas about agency into the concept of 'choice': one can choose to be a victim, and can also refuse this designation and make the best of one's lot in life. The ideal neoliberal subject, then, is one who faces adversity and makes the best of all situations. This contemporary 'positive thinking' can be criticized for its lack of attention to structural inequalities and the fact that the socially privileged may have more resources to deal with life's challenges. The pressures it creates to evade victimhood have been highlighted in empirical research: for instance, Baker (2010) conducted interviews with 55 young women in Australia who went to great lengths to avoid the 'victim' label, associating it with a lack of personal responsibility and control. This was particularly pronounced amongst the more disadvantaged in the sample. Negative experiences – including sexual and domestic

violence – were presented as ultimately strengthening: this compares with McCaffrey's (1998) study of sexual violence survivors in the United States, who also emphasized taking responsibility for themselves. These themes were echoed recently in the international One Billion Rising initiative, created by American *Vagina Monologues* author Eve Ensler as a means for women to come together and (literally) dance to 'rise above' experiences of sexual violence. Although it undoubtedly had positive aspects and effects, Ensler's project also corresponded well with the neoliberal lexicon, and was criticized by women in the global South and elsewhere as being individualistic, patronizing and neocolonial (Gyte 2013).

There is psychological work involved in living up to the strictures of neoliberal individualism, and this can have punitive social and psychological consequences for those who fail to evade victimhood or 'choose' not to rise above their misfortune (Gruber 2009; Baker 2010). Indeed, the self-responsibility of the women in Baker's (2010) sample translated into a lack of sympathy for others, especially those they perceived as careless. This also needs to be seen in the context of declining social safety nets in western countries which is scaffolded by the demonization of dependency in social policy and popular culture (Baker 2010). Individualization is part of a lengthy process of depoliticizing the postmodern and neoliberal subject: inner transformation has taken the place of social change (Foucault 1988a, b; Mardorossian 2002: 756). Furthermore, this is reflected in the 'turn to interiority' in social and cultural theory, which has had two major effects in relation to sexual violence scholarship: a dominance of models that emphasize individual subjectivities while de-emphasizing the social and structural (Mardorossian 2002), and a preponderance of postmodern/post-structural work in which 'victim' is juxtaposed with agency, and in which sexual violence itself is framed and even produced by discourse. The latter has emerged directly from theoretical challenges to the politics of 'experience', most prominently Brown's (1995) critique of the feminist movement for writing sexual subordination into politics and law and inscribing femaleness as violability. Feminism, Brown argues, has fixed women's identities as 'wounded' and solidified the state in the category of

'protector', creating dependent subjects who are then easier to regulate.

Seen in this light, the comments of Wolf and others can be better understood. Indeed, the neoliberal politics of personal responsibility has developed alongside debates within the feminist movement, with radical feminists in particular seen as responsible for emphasizing women's experiences of subordination and constructing them as helpless and passive. Postmodern suspicion of the term 'victim' and politics grounded in the idea of a universal and unified women's experience has shaped the direction of contemporary feminist thought and action: recent approaches to sexual violence in particular have tended to emphasize women's resistance and agency, with victimhood seen as an unhelpful second-wave relic which has problematic links with neoconservatism (Marcus 1992; Gavey 1999; Convery 2006). There has also been a shift away from mechanisms of state support, conceptualizing these as paternalistic and expressing suspicion at how feminist anti-rape politics has, often unwittingly, been co-opted by 'law and order' agendas (Bumiller 2008). Critiques of the 'politics of pity' (Aradau 2004) have analysed how this can fit well with neoconservative criminal justice and moral projects, and uses victims' voices as a tool of state regulation (there are links here with trafficking politics). There have also been particular sensitivities around not objectifying women in 'developing' countries by positioning them as passive victims of practices considered by the West to be barbaric, and thereby strengthening neo-imperial agendas.

For some postmodern feminists, naming victims or oppressions articulates victim psychology (Convery 2006): this has been echoed in therapeutic parlance, in which the term 'survivor' has become common currency, with victimization seen as a state it is important to overcome. Recent western psychological literature has positioned victimhood as underdevelopment in the journey towards self-actualization (Convery 2006), partly in reaction to the gradual pathologization of the 'victim' which, it is argued, has meant that being one has become analogous to having a long-term illness. It is felt that these discourses have shaped victims' own conceptualizations of their experience and limited their agency

(Lamb 1999). There been similar criminological critiques of the concept, in which it is positioned as an identity and even a 'career' in relation to the criminal justice system and 'helping' professions (Walklate 2011: 183). The dominant focus now is upon the journey of personal empowerment and choice to move from 'victim' to 'survivor', seen through the lens of resilience, which helps to illuminate 'how it is that some people do well in their lives, despite being exposed to adverse life chances, while others exposed to those same adverse conditions, do not' (Walklate 2011: 180).[2]

Such debates have also been echoed by more populist arguments, which began to emanate in the 1990s from the margins of the feminist movement or from disillusioned former activists, many based in the United States. Christina Hoff-Sommers (1994) lamented what she saw as a shift within feminism from liberal demands for equal rights to seeing women as victims of patriarchy. Terming this latter 'gender feminism', she set it against 'equality feminism' which, she argued, correctly sought answers to social problems not in structural change but in women's individual self-fulfilment. Similarly, Wolf (1994) in the 1990s compared 'victim feminism' to 'power feminism', contending that the former was analogous to the Victorian invalid who relished the power over others that her illness brought (it is not difficult to see here the seeds of her defence of Assange). Journalist Katie Roiphe and maverick academic Camille Paglia both targeted feminist sexual violence politics, arguing that this reinforced women's vulnerability by celebrating their victimhood (McCaffrey 1998). Roiphe (1994) explicitly combined postmodern and neoconservative ideas in her analysis of campus feminist anti-rape campaigns as *producing* victims and potential victims through the developing 'date rape' narrative, which positioned women as weak, fragile creatures without any sexual desire. Such analyses tapped into the broader western backlash against feminism which constructed it as paranoid, grasping, anti-sex and anti-men (Faludi 1992).

Aspects of these arguments were also taken up by right-wing commentators, informing their impatience towards certain

'victims', such as welfare claimants, single mothers and asylum-seekers. This took postmodern ideas around the discursive shaping of experience and distorted them to a point at which 'constructed' became 'made up'. In relation to sexual violence, customary right-wing incredulities were strengthened: for instance, when the term 'date rape' was created in the 1990s, neoconservative critics in the United States suggested that, previously, the experience itself did not exist (Gilbert 1991, 1995). Set within these narratives, social justice advocacy was constructed as oppressive and controlling 'victimology' and 'political correctness', and neoconservatives were positioned as champions of free speech. It was argued that claims of victimization were fabricated or exaggerated, and that the 'cult of victimhood' had been manipulated to obtain special treatment or public sympathy (Cole 1999; Convery 2006). Groups pleaded 'victimhood' to evade personal responsibility, it was contended, and this set in train a cycle of dependency (Convery 2006). Ironically, however, these same conservatives often positioned themselves as 'victims' of 'special interests' (Coulter 2009) – there are links here with Lévy's defence of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, even though it came from the political Left.

Where 'victimhood' is concerned, then, the contemporary context sees a strong message emanating from a variety of different quarters and political persuasions. Neoliberal ideas about personal responsibility and neoconservative anti-victim rhetoric commingle with postmodern critiques of 'victim' subjectivity as a form of governance to create a politics in which victimhood is either a state of laziness or dependence or a sign of psychological underdevelopment and a disciplinary regime. Postmodern ideas about agency are transmuted by both neoliberal and neoconservative discourses into a rather facile formulation of 'choice', although there is little discussion of perpetrators' agency or choices. In terms of sexual violence, the old dichotomy between 'madonna' and 'whore' which defined 'undeserving' and 'deserving' victims (Phipps 2009) may now have been augmented by a new one based on ideas about personal responsibility. This individualistic politics is very western (Woodhead and Wessley 2010) and needs to be contextualized in relation to cuts to statutory services and violence against women

funding. It is also, I contend, both produced by and productive of the backlash against feminism.

Feminism, neoconservatism and sexual violence

It is often illuminating to examine the silences in political debates: in the three case studies covered in this chapter, there was very little gender commentary and a certain amount of gender essentialism mobilized on the Left as well as the Right. Supporters of all three men attempted to excuse their actions via the construction of male sexuality as somehow inevitable, reflecting neoconservative gender traditionalism as well as tapping into the neoliberal sexualization of consumer culture and possibly even the resurgence of evolutionary theory. The message was clear: powerful men have powerful urges (McRobie 2011), and, once set in train, their sexual desires are difficult if not impossible to check. Assange, it was claimed, was a man of 'strong sexual appetites' (Pendlebury 2010), and the status of both Strauss-Kahn and Polanski as infamous womanizers was thought to make their actions understandable, if not unavoidable (Evans 2005; McRobie 2011). Strauss-Kahn's wife described him as a 'seducer', informing the press that the weekend of the alleged assault in Manhattan he had already had sexual relations with three other women in preparation for his presidential bid (NewsCore 2011, cited in Fine 2012), as though promiscuity self-evidently went hand-in-hand with power. Similarly, Tracy Quan (2010) speculated that the allegations against Assange might actually contribute to his popularity and status as a 'sex symbol'.

These representations framed the idea of sexual assault as merely seduction gone awry, an assiduous myth which has been refuted repeatedly by years of feminist research and theorizing of rape as a product of gendered power relations (Cahill 2001). George Galloway, ex-leader of the UK socialist party Respect, argued that Assange's actions amounted to 'bad sexual etiquette' rather than a crime, stating, 'not everybody needs to be asked prior to each insertion' (BBC News 2012b). His comments were widely

criticized and led to the departure of his successive Respect leader Salma Yaqoob (Quinn 2012), but Galloway also received a great deal of support, including from far-left network Socialist Unity (Socialist Unity 2012). In influential left-wing political newsletter *Counterpunch*, American economist and prominent 'war on terror' opponent Paul Craig Roberts (2010) also asked: 'Think about this for a minute. Other than male porn stars who are bored with it all, how many men can stop at the point of orgasm or when approaching orgasm? How does anyone know where Assange was in the process of the sex act?' This is an example of what Adrienne Rich in 1980 (645) termed the 'penis with a life of its own' argument; taking as given the patriarchal rights of men over women's bodies and mobilizing an adolescent model of a male sex drive which 'once triggered cannot take responsibility for itself or take no for an answer' (Rich 1980: 646).

Given such regressive arguments from his advocates, it is perhaps fitting that liberal hero Assange styled himself as the victim of vengeful radical feminists. Calling the prosecutor a 'man-hating lesbian' and Sweden a 'man-hating matriarchy' (Norman 2012a), he claimed that he had fallen into a 'hornet's nest of revolutionary feminists', and that Sweden was like Saudi Arabia for men (Miriam 2010). His supporters followed suit, with Pendlebury (2010) terming one of the complainants a 'well-known radical feminist' and stating that she had been 'the protégée of a militant feminist academic', as if this somehow damaged her credibility. The prosecution lawyer was termed a 'gender lawyer', and 'malicious radical feminist' who was 'biased against men', by retired senior Swedish judge Brita Sundberg-Weitman (Addley 2011). In *Counterpunch*, the other complainant was described as a 'vengeful radical feminist' and Sweden as a 'female kingdom' (Shamir and Bennett 2010) while, on the website Justice for Assange, it was incorrectly claimed that in Sweden women had more rights than men. Tracy Quan (2010) wondered whether living in egalitarian Sweden had made Assange's accusers hungry for the 'insensitivity' he could provide. This characterization of feminism as biased, vindictive and anti-men is emblematic of the neoconservative backlash (Faludi 1992), but in this case was used by an anti-establishment figure and

his supporters, perhaps indicating the relatively precarious position of feminism at both ends of the political spectrum.

Similarly, in relation to Strauss-Kahn, Dershowitz (2011) argued that sex crimes prosecutors were agenda-driven zealots. Human rights campaigner and former diplomat Craig Murray went further to contend:

> The DSK case and the Assange case have brought to the fore the true ugliness of sex negative feminism and man hatred, and the extent to which they made inroads into our culture and society just as insidious as the right-wing propaganda of the Murdochs. They have also shown how those right-wing forces can so easily hijack stupid blinkered man haters to the right-wing agenda. (Murray 2011)

While pejorative, this quote cites a legitimate set of concerns which has materialized around the links between radical feminism and right-wing agendas. Alongside the neoconservative backlash against feminism, there has been a rather contradictory enmeshment of some forms of feminist activism, particularly in the sexual violence arena, with crime control and the incarceration of certain groups of underprivileged men (Daly 2006). Radical feminists have advocated a host of reforms to punish gender-based crimes which have often had the unintended effect of strengthening the state's coercive power (Gruber 2009). Sexual violence is now couched almost exclusively in the language of crime, with very little attempt at more sophisticated analyses. This also informs international activism on violence against women, which is often co-opted by neoconservative rhetorics constructing other cultures as inherently violent and dysfunctional and using women's victimization as a rhetorical device to justify culturally, politically and economically imperialist projects. This has a long history, cited by Women Against Rape in their defence of Assange:

> There is a long tradition of the use of rape and sexual assault for political agendas that have nothing to do with women's safety. In the south of the US, the lynching of black men was often justified on grounds that they had raped or even looked at a white woman.

> Women don't take kindly to our demand for safety being misused. (Axelsson 2010)

This marriage of radical feminist and neoconservative agendas has largely been one of convenience, and voluntary sector groups and services, in the battle to survive, frequently lack the luxury of reflecting upon their bedfellows (Bumiller 2008). However, many feminists who have instinctually seen their role as fighting against the patriarchal state have lamented the fact that feminism is now publicly and politically associated with crime control (Bumiller 2008; Gruber 2009). There are also differences between and among white and racialized women in the degree to which the state and the criminal justice system are viewed as trustworthy and effective sites for responding to violence against women (Daly 2006). The strongest critiques have come from those of the postmodern persuasion, although it could be argued that postmodern and 'third wave' preoccupations with sexual identities and empowerment, often defined in neoliberal terms, have left contemporary radical feminists with few allies (this can also be seen in anti-trafficking politics). The convergence of feminist concerns with women's victimization with neoconservative projects of social control partially explains left-wing ambivalence in relation to feminist sexual violence politics. However, this can also be seen to have produced the various forms of rape apologism seen in the three cases discussed here.

The uneasy relationship between feminism and the Left, then, is inextricably linked to the fight against neoconservatism. In the three case studies in this chapter, this was particularly apparent, with all the men positioned as victims of an overzealous US criminal justice system and their supporters styling themselves as the forces of progressiveness and freedom. This was particularly manifest in the case of Assange: his status as an anti-American hero situated him, for some of his supporters, as incapable of perpetrating sexual violence. Instead, it was claimed that he had been the victim of a CIA sting and a project to eventually extradite him to the United States to answer charges related to WikiLeaks. Supporters such as Michael Moore, Naomi Klein, Naomi Wolf, Guantanamo

survivor David Hicks and the European group Women Against Rape all made statements questioning the nature and purpose of the prosecution. Moore called the case 'a bunch of hooey', while American left-wing political commentator Mark Crispin Miller claimed that one of Assange's accusers had CIA and anti-Castro ties, a rumour repeated by a number of others (Harding 2010; Miriam 2010; Pollitt 2010). In *Counterpunch*, Roberts wrote:

> If reports are correct, two women, who possibly could be CIA or Mossad assets, have brought sex charges against Assange. Would a real government that had any integrity and commitment to truth try to blacken the name of the prime truth teller of our time on the basis of such flimsy charges? Obviously, Sweden has become another two-bit punk puppet government of the United States. (Roberts 2010)

This framing of the case as a matter of anti-imperial struggle eventually led to Assange being granted asylum by Ecuador on the grounds of human rights (Hughes 2012): the irony of this when set against the charges against him, as well as Ecuador's own record on human rights and free speech, was not lost on some commentators (Braiker 2012). Following this, Assange was also offered (and accepted by proxy) an Aboriginal Nations passport in a ceremony in Sydney, with Indigenous Social Justice Association president Ray Jackson stating that the Australian government had not given the WikiLeaks founder sufficient aid (World News Australia 2012).

Polanski was also positioned as the victim of an overzealous US legal system intent on sentencing him for an ancient crime. Many of his champions stressed the arbitrariness of the attempted extradition, after 31 years of official indifference (Bennett 2010). Others went further, placing Polanski as a hero and freedom fighter against a vengeful US state (Poirier 2010). Similarly, the US legal system was interpreted as malicious and fanatical in relation to Strauss-Kahn (Ellison 2011). French commentators were particularly aggrieved at how he was treated in New York, and French media were threatened with legal action for publishing photos of him in handcuffs, with the handcuffing itself characterized by some as 'hyper-violent' (Willsher 2011). Former French justice minister

Elisabeth Guigou said she found the photos of Strauss-Kahn on the front page of newspapers and magazines a sign of 'brutality and incredible cruelty', and expressed relief that the French justice system was not as 'accusatory' as that of the United States (Boot 2012: 96). Christine Boutin, head of France's Christian Democratic Party, was quoted as saying Strauss-Kahn had been trapped (Hallett 2011). A poll of the French public found that 57 per cent thought he had been framed (White 2011) by the Germans, President Sarkozy or the United States (Zoe Williams 2011a).

What is particularly interesting here is not the point that allegations against the three men had been made at politically convenient times for the United States or that, because of extraneous factors, they had been treated in a more heavy-handed way than others accused of similar crimes; it is the attendant demand that, because of this, they should be allowed to evade justice, or the assumption that, due to the surrounding politics, the accusations could not be true. As a result of this dualistic framework, three men accused of sex crimes were able to emerge as heroes for some on the western Left (Haines 2011: 28). Following the allegations against Assange, he was invited to speak at the major anti-capitalist gathering Occupy LSX (London Stock Exchange), despite the fact that many women (and more than a few men) in the Occupy movement expressed discomfort (Willitts 2011), and during his time in the Ecuadorean Embassy was invited to give video addresses to both the Oxford and Cambridge Unions, although the latter was cancelled due to technical difficulties (Chan 2013). In 2012, Strauss-Kahn was also invited to address the Cambridge Union (Eden 2012), and, though more than 750 students subsequently signed a petition asking for this decision to be reconsidered (Levy 2012), the talk went ahead (BBC News 2012a).

The assumption that left-wing men are above misogyny is contradicted by a mass of evidence, relating to the 'old' socialist labour movement and also to more contemporary punk and anarchist communities (Clarke 2004). Furthermore, there have recently been stories concerning sexual harassment and assault being perpetrated and swept under the carpet in various Occupy camps on both sides of the Atlantic (Forty Shades of Grey 2011;

Miles 2011; *The Scotsman* 2011). There is some evidence that, in addition to positioning gender issues as secondary to movement unity, left-wingers may tolerate sexual transgressions under the banner of 'progressiveness' (Sere 2004; Wu 2004), a trend which could be observed especially in the positioning of Polanski as the victim of neoconservative prudes, or, as French writer Agnès Poirier (2010) put it, a 'rampant moral McCarthyism'. In this case, as Bennett (2010) commented, a question of individual justice was transformed into a more general stand-off between Europeans and rednecks, sophisticates and puritans. Similarly, Naomi Wolf (2011) compared Assange to Oscar Wilde and the 'case of morals' around him, and Strauss-Kahn complained that the 'prudish' press objected to his 'libertine lifestyle', with some of his supporters suggesting that the progressive French would tolerate sexual transgressions which other women did not (Alcoff 2011; Fassin 2011). The position of morality in the contemporary political lexicon is a fascinating one, appearing to have become a right-wing preserve while left-wingers attempt to distance themselves. Unfortunately feminism, particularly the radical strand, has also become caught up in this politics as a form of sexual morality, and at times the fight against neoconservative moralism and imperialism appears to justify misogyny.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has used the cases of Julian Assange, Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Roman Polanski to explore the contemporary terrain of sexual violence politics. There has been no attempt to decide on the relative guilt or innocence of the three men: instead, I have examined the debates around the cases and attempted to link these to the broader political and discursive context of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. I have illuminated several aspects of what I see as a new matrix in sexual violence politics: a suspicion of victimhood and reluctance to moralize which fits well with neoliberal individualism, which has emerged

partly in response to the association of radical feminist activism with neoconservative 'law and order' mentalities of social control. This is framed by two related backlashes: first, the right-wing backlash against feminism, which positions it as anti-men and concerned with 'political correctness' and 'victimology', themes which can also be seen in postmodern and 'third wave' critiques of other feminisms as prudish and insufficiently focused on women's agency; second, the left-wing backlash against the United States which situates it as the driver of current neoconservative projects and also shapes a discomfort with feminist 'victimology' as being implicated in these. This informs a left-wing ambivalence towards feminist sexual violence politics which can be seen in all three cases discussed here. This contemporary field inevitably presents difficulties of positioning for feminist thought and action, particularly in terms of how to honour the experience of sexual violence victims and survivors without playing into judgemental forms of morality or punitive forms of regulation.

A key current feminist attempt to navigate these waters is Slutwalk, a 'third wave' feminist initiative focused on women's rights to look and act as they please, without risk of or blame for sexual violence. Emerging in Canada in 2011 in response to a police officer's comment that in order to remain safe, women should 'avoid dressing like sluts', these marches and rallies subsequently spread throughout North America and worldwide to seventy-five cities in countries such as India, Poland, Argentina, Sweden, Australia, Brazil, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Valenti 2011; Ringrose and Renold 2012). Underpinning the protests was an attempt on the part of young women (and men supporting them) to reclaim the word 'slut' in positive ways as denoting a female sexual agency which nevertheless was not an incitement to violence. Many of the women (and some of the men) involved in the marches dressed in sexually provocative ways, but also carried banners (or wrote on their bodies) slogans such as 'my short skirt is not the problem' (Ringrose and Renold 2012: 334). The Slutwalk movement was hailed by some as a victory for the politics of resignification and an attempt to make feminism 'sexy' again, as well as a refusal of the neoconservative politics of 'slut-shaming' sexual

regulation and blame and a vehicle for unity behind the shared identity of 'slut' (Ringrose and Renold 2012: 335).

However, this laudable attempt to avoid the politics of personal responsibility and neoconservative crime control can also be seen as embedded in neoliberal individualism and sexualized consumer culture, with no critical purchase on the white, western, patriarchal, capitalist, middle-class, heteronormative and ableist nature of the 'femininity' and sexuality which is being celebrated (Henry 2004: 71; O'Keefe 2004). Such feminism, which has been critiqued for being all sexual 'liberation' and no sexual politics, has generally been to the detriment of socio-economically disadvantaged women, women of colour and women from the global South (McRobie 2011) and has been criticized by black women's groups and others for embodying parochial concerns, despite its claims to universality (Crunk Feminist Collective 2011). In particular, these groups have argued that the sexual liberation offered to white, middle-class women through the reclamation of the word 'slut' is not available to women of colour, due to the strong associations of this word with historically entrenched racist ideologies and practices (Black Women's Blueprint 2011). Slutwalk London was also recently at the centre of controversy after one of its members posted an online defence of Assange, from which the group as a whole later distanced itself. This was cited by some commentators as a sign of the apolitical and contradictory nature of the Slutwalk movement as a whole (Ditum 2012; Willitts 2012). An alternative and older form of politics can be seen in Reclaim the Night (or 'Take Back the Night' in North America), which is also focused on women's rights to move through public space as they please, but roots itself in a more traditional radical feminism. However, this initiative has also been at the centre of controversy due to issues around its 'women only' policy and what this means for trans* inclusion, which, even after clarifications of a trans* inclusive approach,[3] has linked the movement to a broader problematic around the rather neoconservative gender essentialism which has been situated as part of some contemporary radical feminisms (Helen G 2012).

The contemporary terrain of sexual violence politics, then, is a fraught and precarious one, and it seems that the dialectic between

neoliberalism and neoconservatism tends to structure feminist initiatives by propelling them towards one of these discursive frameworks, often in reaction to the other. It is also always edifying to examine the silences in contemporary political debates, and it is notable that the experiences of the complainants were either dismissed or erased by other political agendas in all three of the case studies discussed here. As Richard Adams wrote in the *Guardian* in relation to the women who had made allegations against Assange: 'Worst of all has been the suggestion that somehow their ordeal does not count, that they are an inconvenient distraction, the mad women in the attic, caught up in the clash of powerful forces involving the world's media and the US government in all its might' (Adams 2010).

This lack of focus on the experiential, even from feminist commentators, can be compared to the disproportionate attention seen in other debates covered in this book: for instance in sex work, where the politics of 'experience' and 'authenticity' has become an end in itself. This is no doubt in part due to the politically charged nature of the three case studies, which meant that each took on a life of its own: but it can also be argued that the experience of sexual violence victimization has been co-opted by the Right in such dubious ways that on the Left it has become risky to emphasize it.

5
The New Reproductive Regimes of Truth

> Doula, home birth, water birth outside, squatted, feeling wonderful, paced house, breathed, hummed and sang through contractions, focussed on candle flame, baby came through the water as if like a magical baby. Every doubt was followed up by beautiful thoughts, actions and connections.
>
> www.positivebirthstories.com

> My son's [homebirth] was beyond painful. I really cannot come up with words to describe the horrible pain I experienced. I felt like I was screaming the whole time. My midwife called it vocalizing but it felt like screaming to me. It was horrible. It is not supposed to be this way. I thought my endorphins were supposed to kick in and help.
>
> www.homebirthdebate.blogspot.com

Birth in the 1970s (for white, middle-class western women) was very different from both these contemporary examples. For many, it was an institutionalized experience: they were delivered in hospitals by male obstetricians, with access to a variety of anaesthetics and analgesics. Labour was often a supine process and women birthed in the lithotomy position, legs in stirrups; interventions

such as forceps and vacuum extraction were commonplace, and caesarean sections were on the rise. Babies were routinely washed, dressed and taken away immediately post-partum, to be formula fed by nurses while the mother was in recovery (Palmer 1988; Lee 2008). This represented the apex of more than two hundred years of medicalization. Until the seventeenth century, childbirth and the neonatal period in most parts of the world had been firmly positioned in the domestic arena, with women attended by lay midwives, family and close friends (Henley-Einion 2009). As the medical body became the subject of analysis post-Enlightenment (Foucault 1973[1963]), reproduction in the West turned into a key site for surveillance and normalization. Pregnant women and birthing mothers were transformed into patients under the new specialisms of obstetrics and gynaecology, with symptoms which needed to be assessed, treated and monitored by doctors, consultants and an increasingly professionalized cadre of midwives.

The medicalization of childbirth was partly a constructive response to the deteriorating living and birthing conditions which accompanied industrialization, an effort to reduce rates of infant and maternal mortality from complications such as foetal injury, haemorrhage and puerperal sepsis (childbed fever) during a pre-antibiotic era (Purdy 2001; Henley-Einion 2009; Gibson 2011). This was largely achieved, and together with improvements in disease control, living standards and diet, medicalization meant that maternal mortality in the West fell rapidly during the twentieth century. However, from the 1970s onwards, a critical mass of western feminists, obstetricians, midwives and other activists, led by individuals such as British anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger (1972, 1978), American midwife Ina May Gaskin (1976), French doctor Michel Odent (1984) and British gynaecologist Wendy Savage (1986), began to form around the idea that these gains were being made at the expense of women's control over their reproductive capacities (Beckett 2005; Henley-Einion 2009).[1] Medicalization, it was claimed, had repositioned women as objects of scientific discourse rather than subjects with their own agency and knowledge (Johnson 2008). One of the negative effects of this was to override women's own expertise and ability to manage

normal bodily events, such as childbirth and breastfeeding, as well as undermining the midwives who had historically provided assistance (Beckett 2005). Instead, the ideology of technology treated women's bodies as birthing machines within a system of masculine and industrialized values of order, predictability and control (Henley-Einion 2009). Medicalized pregnancy and hospitalized birth were disembodied processes where the focus was on managing symptoms and interventions, rather than on the overall meaning of the experience (Johnson 2008). Furthermore, the relocation of childbirth to institutional settings had led to a loss of intimacy and physicality and a marginalizing of domestic support, as well as the adoption of procedures which made labour and delivery easier for physicians and more difficult for women (Beckett 2005; Henley-Einion 2009). As a result, it was argued, the inherently empowering nature of pregnancy and childbirth had been forgotten (Henley-Einion 2009).

Moreover, it was claimed, the agenda of medicalization had taken on a life of its own due to underlying profit-making imperatives and territorial battles between midwives and obstetricians, as well as the fact that each intervention in the process of childbirth made subsequent ones more likely (Beckett 2005). Feminists and birth activists highlighted rising levels of unnecessary interference in uncomplicated deliveries, for instance the routine use of electronic foetal monitoring, epidural anaesthesia and oxytocin to augment labour, which had led to a rise in assisted and surgical deliveries and routine episiotomies within a 'cascade of intervention' (World Health Organization 1996: 10). It was also thought that women were being encouraged to choose these interventions because of a lack of education about their implications and a learned fear of the pain and 'risk' of childbirth (Henley-Einion 2009). This masculinist agenda perpetuated men's control over women's bodies and reflected a pathologization of women's natural reproductive capacities (Purdy 2001; Johnson 2008). Feminists argued that doctors had used their growing political and cultural authority to define pregnancy and childbirth as inherently risky, to eliminate and/or regulate midwives and to fuel the perception that women (especially middle- and upper-class women)

were unable to withstand the process (Beckett 2005; Henley-Einion 2009). This also positioned the foetus as a separate patient in need of protection, on the basis of which pregnant and birthing women were controlled and regulated (Beckett 2005). There were accompanying anti-capitalist critiques of the infant formula industry (the US-led boycott of Nestlé which began in the 1970s being the most high-profile and successful resultant campaign), which was associated with its own profit-making imperative, with harm to infants in developing countries and with maintaining productivity in industrialized nations since breastfeeding was difficult to combine with paid work in the absence of structural supports for breastfeeding mothers (Palmer 1988).

In the early twentieth century, first-wave western feminists had struggled against the prevailing medical culture to overcome resistance to the use of pain relief in labour (Beckett 2005) as part of a broader fight to free women from the dominion of biology and the tyranny of their reproductive capacities (Purdy 2001). Second-wave birth and breastfeeding activists took a similarly counter-cultural stance, only the object of their opposition had dramatically shifted and, ironically, there was a subsequent convergence between feminist critiques of medicalization and conservative and religious discourses on childbirth and child rearing (Beckett 2005). These alliances gave rise to 'natural birth' and breastfeeding movements in many western countries, which remain to the present day and which, I will argue, resonate with neoliberal frameworks around health care and neoconservative gender traditionalism, and so have had substantial influence on policy in the West and elsewhere. This, however, has meant that agendas which originally started in valuable feminist efforts to empower women have begun to take different forms due to their intersections with neoliberal and neoconservative projects.

'Normal birth' and 'breast is best'

In their resistance to the language of medicalization, feminists and other activists have tended to employ the idiom of the 'normal'

or the 'natural' (Beckett 2005). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this language was institutionalized when the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted a definition of 'normal birth'. This was premised on the belief that interventions, although helpful in some cases, were unwelcome in non-complicated labour and delivery (World Health Organization 1996; Chalmers and Porter 2001). The definition of 'normal birth' was '[s]pontaneous in onset, low-risk at the start of labour and remaining so throughout labour and delivery. The infant is born spontaneously in the vertex [head first] position between 37 and 42 completed weeks of pregnancy. After birth, mother and infant are in good condition' (World Health Organization 1996: 4). In such low-risk situations, the WHO argued, women should not be subject to major interventions unnecessarily: in normal birth, there should be a valid reason to intervene in the natural process (World Health Organization 1996: 4).

By the 2000s, the concept of 'normal' or 'natural' birth had become common parlance among birth activists and health professionals in western countries. However, 'normalcy' by this point had become a target to achieve: a desired outcome rather than a designation of low-risk status implying that efforts should be made to avoid unnecessary procedures. From 2003 to 2006, 'normal delivery' rates were published annually in England by the National Health Service Information Centre (National Childbirth Trust 2010). In 2007, a report by the UK Maternity Care Working Party, which included the Royal College of Midwives, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the National Childbirth Trust, the Association of Radical Midwives and BirthChoiceUK, said that maternity services should aim to increase their 'normal birth' rates to 60 per cent by 2010. 'Normal birth' was defined as being 'Without induction, without the use of instruments, not by caesarean section and without general, spinal or epidural anaesthetic before or during delivery' (UK Maternity Care Working Party 2007: 1). This was exemplified by women whose labours began spontaneously and progressed spontaneously without drugs, and who gave birth spontaneously.[2] In all four countries of the United Kingdom, maternity policy in the 2000s

was directed towards promoting 'normal birth' and reducing interventions (National Childbirth Trust 2010). The idea of 'normal birth' was also being promoted in other European countries, North America and around the world in similar ways (Hendrix 2011). In the United States, the 1989 revision of the Standard Certificate of Live Birth had introduced new items on obstetric procedures and method of delivery as a means of monitoring uses of technology during labour (Freedman et al. 1988), and the caesarean rate had been a matter of concern since the late 1970s (Menacker 2005).

A shift had occurred, from the feminist-inspired aim of protecting women from the process of medicalization to the more neoliberalized practice of using 'normal birth' as an indicator and target and promoting 'normalcy' of outcome: within this new framework, there was a clear preference for particular types of birth over others. There was also an implication that almost every woman was able to birth 'normally', so the focus should be on proactively attempting to reduce levels of intervention rather than merely ensuring that low-risk women were not interfered with. This was signalled by an overarching shift in language, for example from the WHO's 1990s' notion of 'care in normal birth' (World Health Organization 1996) to the Royal College of Midwives' 'Campaign for Normal Birth', launched in 2005, and the Canadian 'Power to Push Campaign', inaugurated in 2010. In this outcome-focused agenda, a particular birth script took centre stage, often predominant over maternal preference or the experience of the birthing mother. Indeed, in 2010 the UK National Childbirth Trust began recommending the use of the outcome of 'normal birth' as a measure of the quality of the process of care (National Childbirth Trust 2010), assuming that the latter could be read off from the former. This hypothesis was not completely supported by empirical research, suggesting that birth trauma was most often related to lack of support during labour and delivery, and that most women experiencing trauma in fact had 'normal' deliveries (Ayers and Ford 2009; Ford and Ayers 2009). Nevertheless, the outcome-focused model coincided with neoliberal health service frameworks and cost-cutting agendas: in a 2010 document detailing frontline UK health service staff suggestions for cost-effective

care, increasing the 'normal birth' rate and reducing unnecessary caesareans was positioned as a way to save millions of pounds (National Health Service 2010), and in 2013 US think tank the Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform reported that reducing the caesarean rate to the WHO-recommended 15 per cent would save the government US$5 billion in healthcare spending.

In the United Kingdom, alongside the promotion of 'normal birth', the National Health Service also adopted the slogan 'breast is best' in the 2000s in a drive to encourage all new mothers to breastfeed and to persuade fathers and the wider population to support breastfeeding (Smyth 2012). This evoked broader trends towards grassroots breastfeeding promotion which had begun in the 1970s and 1980s in western countries, and also built upon WHO recommendations that there should be immediate skin-to-skin contact post-partum and that suckling/breastfeeding should be encouraged in the first hour after birth (World Health Organization/UNICEF 1989; World Health Organization 1996: 33). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and WHO Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative was established in 1991 to encourage maternity hospitals to promote breastfeeding and act in accordance with the 1981 WHO International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, which stated that health facilities should not sell, give away or display materials related to infant formula (World Health Organization and UNICEF 2009). This fed into a growing political movement around breastfeeding which was underpinned by a burgeoning 'science' in which breast milk and suckling were associated with a host of health benefits – protection from allergies, infection and disease and high IQ scores for infants and children, as well as health benefits for the mother and superior mother/child bonding (Smyth 2012; Joan Wolf 2011). Formula feeding was correspondingly associated with a large number of dangers to infants, such as asthma, allergies, reduced cognitive development, acute respiratory and cardiovascular disease, diabetes, infection, nutritional deficiencies, obesity and death, and risks to mothers such as breast, ovarian and endometrial cancer, osteoporosis, arthritis, diabetes, stress and obesity (InFact Canada

2006). However, these claims were often based on patchy evidence or studies which confused cause and effect, failed to control for socio-economic differences or parental behaviour, used very small or unrepresentative samples, such as premature infants, or extrapolated evidence from developing countries to those in the West (Goldin, Smyth and Foulkes 2006; Joan Wolf 2007, 2011; Hoddinott, Tappin and Wright 2008; Fewtrell et al. 2011).

Much like the initiatives on 'normal birth', promoting breastfeeding cohered with broader neoliberal health service trends: in particular, preventative agendas around risk which aimed to create behavioural change through target-setting and monitoring and which emphasized individual responsibility rather than structural constraints (there were similarities, for example, with initiatives around obesity and smoking). In the United Kingdom, targets were set to increase the number of mothers who started breastfeeding and continued exclusive breastfeeding for up to six months (Crossley 2009; Fewtrell et al. 2011). This was supported by legislation, with discrimination against breastfeeding mothers outlawed by the Breastfeeding etc. (Scotland) Act in 2005 and the Equality Act 2010 in England and Wales, and the Workplace Regulations and Approved Code of Practice requiring employers to provide suitable facilities for pregnant and breastfeeding women to rest (National Health Service 2008).[3] In the United States, breastfeeding had also become a target: from 2006, following a two-year National Breastfeeding Awareness Campaign (Kukla 2006; Wolf 2007), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began to produce a 'breastfeeding report card', providing information on state and national trends. There were stronger attempts here to legislate behaviour: as of 2011, every state except West Virginia had some law related to breastfeeding, whether these concerned the right to breastfeed in public or employers making space and time for breastfeeding and educational initiatives to promote it, and in 2010 the federal Fair Labor Standards Act was amended to mandate employers to provide time for mothers to express breast milk (National Conference of State Legislatures 2011). In 2012, a statement issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics positioned breastfeeding as a public health issue and not a lifestyle

choice (American Academy of Pediatrics 2012). A study published in Pediatrics in 2010 (Bartick and Reinhold 2010) indicated that exclusive breastfeeding for six months could save the US economy US$13 billion annually, mostly related to infant mortality and morbidity.

Other countries also either debated or adopted legislative frameworks around breastfeeding, for instance, South Africa (Motsoaledi 2011), Armenia (Mkrtchyan 2011), Indonesia (Vaswani 2010) and Venezuela (Reuters 2013), and still more were engaged in breastfeeding awareness initiatives (see, for example, Wall 2001). Breastfeeding laws generally banned the advertising of formula milk or its free distribution in health facilities, although the Indonesian legislation specified that anyone standing in the way of six months' exclusive breastfeeding could face a fine and up to a year in prison. By 2009, 20,000 maternity facilities in 156 countries had been awarded the WHO/UNICEF 'baby-friendly' designation for their promotion of breastfeeding (World Health Organization and UNICEF 2009). Like 'normal birth', the promotion of breastfeeding had by this point begun to shift from a positive and productive grassroots resistance to medicalization to a normalized imperative. Issues around maternal preference and women's bodily autonomy were superseded by prescribed practices, often regardless of circumstances, with the implication being that all women could and should breastfeed (Wall 2001). Breastfeeding interventions were targeted at large-scale behavioural change, often using mechanisms of fear-production relating to the proposed dangers of formula feeding (see Wolf 2007 for a full discussion of this) and using the rhetoric of risk which had initially been the focus of critique for anti-medicalization activists (Joan Wolf 2011).

As it grew out of the grassroots movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the arena of activism around 'normal birth' and breastfeeding in the 2000s and after began to morph into a more institutionalized coalition of national and international health and policy organizations, non-profit and profit-making companies, health professionals' groups, community and religious groups, and individuals. At times, wildly divergent agendas were brought together. The contemporary field includes key international

actors such as the WHO, UNICEF and similar bodies (Smyth 2012). There is also a general academic consensus (Schmied and Lupton 2001), with journals such as *Birth*, the *Journal of Perinatal Education*, the *International Breastfeeding Journal* and the *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic and Neonatal Nursing* important sites for the dissemination of these agendas. Midwives remain a key group of advocates, and midwifery has grown into a powerful profession with independent and 'radical' midwives' groups, as well as professional organizations for midwives, some state-sponsored and some of which have the ability to license or certify practitioners (Beckett and Hoffman 2005). The International Confederation of Midwives, with more than a hundred member associations in countries worldwide, acts as an umbrella for the various national efforts. The history of midwifery as a social movement informs this new professional politics, which is concerned with promoting and helping midwives as well as helping women (Daviss 2001; MacDonald 2011), especially in the United States where battles over the legitimacy of midwifery remain (Beckett and Hoffman 2005).

There is also an arena of non-profit-making companies, offering ante- and postnatal education to those who can afford to pay for their services, and web-based and helpline assistance which is often provided at no cost. In the United Kingdom, the National Childbirth Trust was founded in 1956 by a middle-class mother who wished to promote the teachings of obstetrician and natural childbirth advocate Grantly Dick-Read. At the time of writing, the Trust had grown into a major organization, operating at local and national levels with a membership of around 100,000 and with a key role in policy (Roberts, Satchwell and Tyler 2011). Four years after the genesis of the NCT, US-based Lamaze International was set up by a group of parents, childbirth educators and health professionals in order to teach the natural childbirth method developed by Dr Fernand Lamaze. By the end of 2010, the association had 2,355 members, and 13,300 subscribers to its Building Confidence Week By Week antenatal mails (Lamaze 2011). The La Leche League, also formed in 1956, was initially a small mother-to-mother breastfeeding support group founded by

a number of Catholic women in the United States. At the time of writing, it had developed into a broader (and non-religious) organization with over 3000 groups in more than 60 countries, offering support to breastfeeding mothers and promoting exclusive breastfeeding for six months and continued breastfeeding after that (La Leche League 2012). The contemporary non-profit sector also includes international organizations and initiatives such as One World Birth, the global Breastfeeding Initiative for Child Survival, the World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative, the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action and the International Baby Food Action Network.

At the grassroots level, a plethora of birth, breastfeeding and 'holistic parenting' support groups has emerged, as well as Christian and spiritual groups (Smyth 2012). Many of these make use of the internet and social media, and this also provides a platform for individual advocates and activists, mainly drawn from the burgeoning cadre of largely white and middle-class 'Mummy/Mommy bloggers' (Lopez 2009). There are also any number of local 'alternative birth' and breastfeeding and 'holistic parenting' support groups, communities and helplines, whether local chapters of larger organizations or more grassroots initiatives (see, for example, Beckett and Hoffman 2005; Shaw and Kitzinger 2005; Abbott, Renfrew and McFadden 2006). All this provides a framework in which (predominantly white and middle-class) women are able to educate themselves about birth and breastfeeding choices and use their lay knowledge to demand less childbirth intervention and more breastfeeding support (Johnson 2008). High-profile role models are provided in the form of public figures who are celebrated within activist communities for their positive choices to birth naturally and breastfeed and who represent a fascinating union of agendas around natural and alternative health and competitive commercialized celebrity culture. For example, model Gisele Bündchen, actresses Nicole Richie, Jessica Alba and Halle Berry, and TV presenter Ricki Lake have all been praised for choosing natural childbirth (Babble 2012), while fashion designer and singer Victoria Beckham was widely criticized as being 'too posh to push' for opting for caesarean section for all four of her children (*Daily*

Telegraph 2011). Singer Jennifer Lopez and TV personality Katie Price (Jordan) have both come under fire for formula feeding, and there has been widespread speculation about and monitoring of actress Angelina Jolie's infant feeding choices (*Daily Mail* 2011b; Babyworld 2012; Breastfeeding.com 2012; Rochman 2012).

'Part of me': the new intensive motherhood

It is my contention that the new reproductive 'regimes of truth' around 'normal birth' and breastfeeding have gained immense sociocultural power, partly due to their resonance with contemporary neoliberal and neoconservative agendas, for instance the resurgent gender essentialism and pronatalism which characterizes the moral-political rationality of the New Right (Snitow 1992; Brown 2006). Western commentators (Cameron 2010; Walter 2010) have identified a growing populist biological determinism in increasingly gender-differentiated consumer goods for children, media rhetoric about women's 'emotional intelligence' and a celebration of choices in favour of stay-at-home motherhood, which has been echoed by some academics (notably Hakim 2000, 2003). There are similar themes in the 'self-help' literature which is key to the construction of the neoliberal DIY biography, which makes use of popular and evolutionary psychology and pseudo-neuroscience to claim that 'men are from Mars and women are from Venus' (Gray 1992). These developments have fused with the backlash against feminism and high-achieving women, economic pressures which have intensified competition in labour markets and a general return to biologism in popular science and culture (Cameron 2010). The emergence of evolutionary psychology as a discipline is key: this largely unfalsifiable form of biological constructionism both fixes and romanticizes particular gendered characteristics (Dupré 2010), with no place for the productive role of power and oppression.

The history of the anti-medicalization movement yields similar gender essentialisms in its appeals to women's innate abilities and desires to birth and nurture: as a result, it has been suggested that

it was in part a conservative response to women's emancipation (Mosucci 2003). For example, Grantly Dick-Read, author of *Childbirth Without Fear* (originally published in 1933) and widely regarded as the father of natural childbirth, was a gender conservative who believed that motherhood was a woman's ultimate source of fulfilment, argued that privileged women should drop their claims to emancipation and return to the home (Mosucci 2003), and found one of his first major supporters in the Pope (Caton 1996). Ina May Gaskin, a leading US exponent of natural childbirth, was famous for her spiritual approach to midwifery but also for her residence in New Age community The Farm, set up in 1971 and still operating today with 175 members. Some contemporaneous analysts described this commune as a gender-equal utopia (Conover 1975), but others saw it as a fanatical personality cult centred on Gaskin's husband, whose word was law (Kinkade 1974). Contemporary reproductive politics continues to base itself around biological motherhood, albeit with enduring conflicts between feminist and maternalist ideals (Beckett and Hoffman 2005). Gender essentialisms, together with the neoliberal values of personal achievement and individual responsibility, frame the new politics of 'intensive motherhood' (Lee 2008; Faircloth 2013), 'total motherhood' (Wolf 2007) or 'exclusive motherhood' (Wall 2001), in which mothering is entirely the preserve of women, a journey of self-fulfilment which is absorbing, completely child-centred and in which the mother becomes solely responsible for her child's development and protection from risk (Joan Wolf 2011).

Within this discourse, 'normal' or 'natural' birth is positioned as a defining moment of womanhood, a positive, life-changing and even spiritual experience (see, for example, Humenick 2006). Achieving 'normal birth' is equated with women's empowerment (Beckett 2005), deploying a Cartesian idea of 'mind over matter'. For instance, 'hypnobirthing' mothers are recommended to use the word 'surge' instead of 'contraction' and refer to the waters 'releasing' rather than 'breaking' (Mottershead 2006). Some activists go further to argue that childbirth can (and should) be painless and even erotic, linking women's sexual fulfilment with the mothering

role (see, for example, Hotelling 2009b). This is exemplified by the growing fascination with orgasmic childbirth in the United States and elsewhere, with some proponents positioning this as the only authentic birthing experience, an attainment of physical and emotional ecstasy, rather than merely a successful avoidance of pain medication (see, for example, Hotelling 2009a). However, these ideas are problematized by empirical evidence that painless labour is a reality for a very small minority of women (Melzack 1984; Johnson 2008), and as a result there is a corresponding formulation of motherhood as an experience which allows women to find and fulfil themselves through self-sacrifice. In this narrative, withstanding the ordeal of childbirth is the route to authentic motherhood: in 2009, leading UK midwife Denis Walsh exemplified this view in an interview in the *Observer*, in which he argued that more women should experience painful contractions since they were a 'rite of passage' which facilitated bonding with the infant. These comments were welcomed by the National Childbirth Trust (Campbell 2009). Ideas about women's self-fulfilment through pain tap into long-standing stereotypes about feminine masochism (Baker 2010), and it is worth remembering here that the principle of women's rights to relieve suffering and gain control of the birthing process fuelled first-wave feminist calls for the use of the drug scopolamine in labour (Beckett 2005). In 2011, a survey distributed by the UK Birth Trauma Association revealed that many labouring women had been denied the pain relief they required.

Breastfeeding is similarly positioned as an inherently rewarding, pleasurable and even erotic[4] process facilitated by maternal instinct and love, and has been celebrated by feminists and others as a means by which to reclaim feminine values and the value of nurturing (Schmied and Lupton 2001; Bartlett 2005). During discussions about the Venezuelan bottle-feeding ban, socialist minister Odalis Monzon stated that it was being considered as a way to 'increase the love (between mother and child) because this [had] been lost by these transnational companies selling formula' (Reuters 2013). Again, this is not fully supported by the empirical evidence which shows that many women find nursing both physically and emotionally exhausting (Lee 2008; Schmied et al.

2011): however, these women are generally positioned as immature, disengaged or selfish or as having a false consciousness (Kukla 2006). As Illinois-based lactation consultant Beth Seidel writes, some mothers 'give up at the first hint of a challenge' (Seidel 2012). There is also a corresponding construction of breastfeeding as a heroic act of self-sacrifice, often applied when it is painful or difficult (Wall 2001; Smyth 2012). Many of these messages come together in the following quote from another US lactation consultant, Glenda Dickerson:

> I have felt for years that many mothers wean because they thought they were supposed to love and/or enjoy breastfeeding 24 hours a day. Some of the mothers I have admired the most are mothers that breastfed in spite of not being in love with the act of breastfeeding. They breastfed because they knew it was the right choice for their babies. (from kellymom.com)

These narratives share much with right-wing pronatalism as well as maternalist feminism (see, for example, Gilligan 1982; Ruddick 1989). The idea of maternality as a route to liberation also needs to be set alongside the fact that despite almost fifty years of second-wave activism and some important political gains, the ability to combine motherhood with other social roles does not yet fully exist in many parts of the West and worldwide (Yerkes 2010; Misra, Budig and Boeckmann 2011).

The biological mother/baby relationship underpins breastfeeding politics and advocacy, with fathers and non-biological parents reduced to a supporting role, if any at all (Wall 2001; Schmied and Lupton 2001), and an erasure of others who might be able/wish to conceive, birth and breastfeed a child, for instance some trans men. Materials promoting breastfeeding describe the biological mother and her infant as a 'dyad' (Lauwers and Swisher 2011) or a 'continuum' (Romano and Lothian 2008: 102), indicating a single biological unit (Wolf 2007). Exclusive breastfeeding is seen as essential to this mother/infant symbiosis (Schmied and Lupton 2001), with the primary need of the infant being the breast, and other sources of comfort or sustenance coming second or even

being seen as a threat. The La Leche League's advice to partners states, 'your first job is to *support* breastfeeding, not *compete* with it. A "relief bottle" may seem helpful, but it's more likely to cause breastfeeding problems and health risks for your baby' (La Leche League 2010: 467). Some feminists have argued that this conceptualization of the mother–child continuum is a key element of motherhood as a political project, since it challenges the western neoliberal idea of the autonomous individual (Davis-Floyd 1999; Hausman 2004). However, its effects can also be seen as problematic in that issues around women's sense of self are ignored (Wall 2001), and their needs (for instance, to work, control their bodies or sustain an identity independent of their children) become subsumed by those of the infant or seen as weaknesses to be corrected through educational messages (Kukla 2006: 175). This assumes that women can and should find fulfilment in merging with another, an idea which is not supported by all the empirical evidence (Schmied and Lupton 2001). It also ignores the needs of fathers and partners (both men and women) to establish a meaningful bond, and the fact that infants might benefit from these relationships. Conceptualizations of the breast as essential to bonding have caused some mothers who formula-feed to engage in onerous 'identity work' in order to ease their guilt and shame and preserve a sense of themselves as good mothers (Lee 2008; Crossley 2009; Barston 2012).

Such 'attachment parenting' models originally emerged as part of the post-war agenda around domesticity and gender traditionalism, with ideas about infants needing continual contact with their mothers seen in some quarters as a means of putting women back in their place since they were based on very shaky scientific evidence (Wall 2001; Lee 2008).[5] These connections can be observed in the present day, with the more zealous contemporary breastfeeding advice relying on and perpetuating traditional gender roles in its recommendations for constant mother/infant skin-to-skin contact or 'kangaroo care' (initially used for premature infants – see World Health Organization 2003) and proscribing the use of dummies/pacifiers and artificial feeding devices, even if used to feed breast milk. Exclusive breastfeeding need not mean

gender traditionalism in theory, but in practice this is often the case due to a lack of support for breastfeeding at work or in public (Palmer 1988). This is obviously an argument for structural change rather than a case against breastfeeding, but it is also inevitable that current breastfeeding advocacy should be associated to some extent with stay-at-home motherhood. Commentators such as French feminist Elisabeth Badinter (2010) and American author Erica Jong (2010) have highlighted the pressure that such attachment parenting models place upon mothers, particularly those who lack the resources necessary to engage in intensive parenting practices, and have linked this to rising postnatal depression (see also Zoe Williams 2011b; Pollitt 2012).

A maternalist view of parenting is also echoed in some contemporary models of childbirth which conceptualize it as a women-only experience (and again, exclude the trans man as potential birther of an infant). These have their roots in feminist critiques of masculinist medicine, with valid arguments for preserving women-only space if this is desired and required (Draper 1997). However, such frameworks can also be reactionary in terms of privileging the mother–infant bond and perpetuating essentialisms about women's innate abilities to support and nurture and men's propensities to be controlling and lack emotional intelligence.[6] The most famous proponent of this view is celebrated French obstetrician and 'natural childbirth' activist Michel Odent, who feels that men should never be at the birth of their children, since they tend to keep their partners in the rational world and stop them accessing the primitive, instinctive parts of their brains. In a 2008 article in UK tabloid the *Daily Mail*, Odent also suggested that men who are present at births are often unable to feel attracted to their wives afterwards, mobilizing a construction of male sexuality as being aroused by physical perfection and ignoring other, more plausible causes of a decline in sexual activity after the arrival of a child (Ahlborg, Dahlöf and Hallberg 2005). The idea that men cannot cope with the experience of childbirth or add anything of value to this event is both essentialist and challenged by some of the empirical evidence (Erlandsson and Lindgren 2011). It is partly rooted in the branch of anti-medicalization activism in

which midwifery has often been infused with feminine mystique in order to produce particular narratives around the benefits of this type of care, in the context of threats to the profession. Midwifery has been conceptualized as holistic, in contrast to the objectified and technologized environment of the hospital; midwives are presented as empathic and intuitive, and able to communicate with women in a way that male doctors cannot (Carolan 2010). This is currently magnified in relation to the doula, the privileged West's version of the 'traditional' birth attendant: these women, who are usually untrained, are advertised as kind, caring, supportive, wise and motherly (from britishdoulas.co.uk).

'Nature' and 'culture' commodified

While the gender essentialisms of the new reproductive politics provide a link with neoconservative agendas, there are also a number of key elements which tap into neoliberal rationalities. One of the most obvious is the way in which 'normal birth' and breastfeeding movements are underpinned by western middle-class 'healthism'. This refers to the increasing preoccupation with health issues on the part of privileged social groups and an accompanying politics of patients' rights which draws on neoliberal ideas of consumer choice. It is also characterized by a sceptical engagement with the medical profession and technology, and an allegiance to 'natural' health practices, self-help and eastern medicine (Greenhalgh and Wessley 2004). Like alternative health, the politics of birth and breastfeeding relies very much on lay expertise, with activists assuming their own authority in relation to these and related health issues. The doula exemplifies this trend and is also an embodiment of the movement's opposition to medicalization and embrace of alternative values to do with nature, home and spirituality. It is perhaps partly this connection with the alternative health arena which allows birth and breastfeeding activists to position themselves as avant-garde, counter-cultural and discriminated against (see, for example, Cheyney 2008; Evans 2010), despite

the contemporary hegemony of their ideas (Beckett and Hoffman 2005). However, and perhaps paradoxically, they often also make appeals to science in order to stress the benefits of their preferred practices (Beckett and Hoffman 2005).

Achieving 'normal birth' and successful breastfeeding can also be conceptualized as a 'body project', reflecting the emphasis on bodily maintenance, modification and performance which characterizes contemporary neoliberal societies due to the decline of religious formations of identity, the growth of consumer culture, the performative nature of postmodern identities and the emphasis on individual responsibility. This has produced heightened levels of narcissism and increased levels of surveillance of our own and others' bodies (Foucault 1977; Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991; Shilling 1993). The new reproductive politics resonates with this model in its individualism, focus on achievement and increasing commodification. Breastfeeding, for example, is often constructed as something which needs to be worked on and attained, creating pressure on women to perform appropriately (Lee 2008; Crossley 2009; Thomson et al. 2011). Similarly, MacDonald (2006) argues that achieving a 'natural' delivery has now become an important accomplishment. Reflecting this and also illustrating the confessional nature of contemporary culture (Foucault 1976), activists who make use of social media often present evidence of their reproductive triumphs on their blogs and websites, and there is a variety of YouTube channels dedicated to women's videos of their birthing events (Longhurst 2009). The accompanying narratives of self-actualization belie the fact that the majority of women reporting post-traumatic stress disorder after childbirth have had obstetrically 'normal' vaginal deliveries (Ford and Ayers 2009). They also conceal the fact that in order for 'natural' birth to be positioned as a romanticized ideal, some women are required to 'fail' (MacDonald 2006; Frost et al. 2006). The 'birth plan', originally envisaged as a way for women to avoid escalating interventions (Lothian 2006), has become in some quarters a template for women to 'design their ideal birth' (from birthingnaturally.net) or 'envision [their] perfect divine birth' (from birthsong.com.au) in consumerist terms. Frost et al. (2006) argue that this is implicated

in embedding natural birth into women's psyches and prohibits any discussion of, or preparation for, operative delivery: this makes it likely that women will experience trauma if they do not achieve their objectives.

It is perhaps notable here that in recent years veteran activist Sheila Kitzinger has expressed dismay at the mutation of 'natural birth' into a goal-oriented agenda (Donnelly 2009; Saner 2013). Kitzinger, however, was a key figure in the healthist framings of the new reproductive politics, particularly in terms of its fetishization of the 'natural' and also its associated appropriation of 'traditional' cultures. Her 'psychosexual approach' to childbirth, positioning it as a powerfully erotic experience, was partly the result of anthropological research (Kitzinger 2011 [1980]), and as MacDonald (2006: 239) states, '[p]art of Kitzinger's message was to rest on the claim that natural female bodies and natural births had been rediscovered, as it were, dwelling in traditional societies throughout the globe, proving the existence of a prediscursive nature uncorrupted by scientific culture.' Contemporary reproductive politics similarly takes the 'natural' for granted and conflates it with 'normal' and with a positive and easy experience of birth (Righard 2001; Maternity Care Working Party 2007). As MacDonald (2006) argues, the discourse of 'natural birth' can be seen as positive in its construction of women as strong and powerful in their abilities to deliver by themselves: however, this can also be disempowering for women who are unable to achieve the ideal. Together with the positioning of breast milk as 'nature's perfect food' (Wolf 2007), these ideas also assume that nature is always good and natural substances are always pure. This provides a link with right-wing discourses such as social Darwinism, in which the idea of 'letting nature take its course' has justified eugenic principles and laissez-faire social policies in order to let the most superior individuals flourish while the inferior eventually die out. Unimpeded nature, then, is deeply marked by privilege, and in rejecting a medicalized birth, middle-class activists confirm their elevated social position since only women who know they are able to give birth safely are able to reject the trappings of technology (MacDonald 2011).

Complementing this focus on the 'natural', there is a tendency to search for authenticity and origins in the discussion of alternative birth practices (MacDonald 2006). This positions women as instinctive and closer to nature (Frost et al. 2006), and often involves the Orientalizing of 'traditional' cultures, whether prehistoric or from developing countries (Shuval and Gross 2008). American childbirth educator Judith Lothian (2007: 45) describes her Lamaze class as modelling 'traditional ways of passing information about birth from generation to generation', and advice to mothers to pursue on-demand or extended breastfeeding often makes reference to the fact that these practices are common outside the West, but without highlighting pertinent differences in culture and lifestyle (see, for example, Bumgarner 2000; Kamnitzer 2009; Niala 2012). Grantly Dick-Read's ideas about natural childbirth were partly based on his conviction that 'primitive women' were not troubled by the process. Furthermore, he argued that 'primitives' who died in childbirth did so without sadness, realizing they were not competent to produce children and be members of their tribe. Like the claims of many contemporary activists, however, Dick-Read's points were made despite the fact that he had not spent extensive time in non-western countries (Caton 1996). The lack of an evidence base to corroborate such assertions is particularly problematic when non-western birthing practices are appropriated in the service of authenticity rather than effectiveness. For instance, the 'traditional' birth attendants on which the doula is modelled have not been shown to reduce maternal mortality in developing countries (Kvåle et al. 2005). Indeed, 99% of all maternal deaths worldwide occur in developing countries, often from preventable complications which could be treated with interventions such as assisted or surgical delivery (Dogba and Fournier 2009). Post-partum depression is also more common, especially among rural women (Villegas et al. 2011), and 98% of all neonatal deaths and 97% of all stillbirths occur in these countries, largely due to preventable complications before and during delivery (Zupan 2005). The professionalization of midwifery/provision of other forms of skilled care has been shown to reduce mortality in such cases (Zupan 2005; Dogba and Fournier 2009).

Due to their largely unregulated status, there are no figures for perinatal mortality rates relating to doula-attended births in the West: however, Symon et al. (2010) found a significantly higher rate for births booked under an independent midwife than births in health service units in the United Kingdom. The Birthplace in England study, a national prospective cohort study of almost 65,000 women with low-risk pregnancies (Birthplace in England Collaborative Group 2011), found that there was a threefold increase in poor outcomes for first-time mothers planning a home birth, as opposed to those in midwifery and obstetric units, although the risks were still very small (Newburn 2011). Worldwide, the WHO has estimated that 15 per cent of all women giving birth develop complications serious enough to require rapid and skilled intervention if they are to survive without lifelong disabilities. The 'Trends in Maternal Mortality' joint report by the UN estimated that providing timely interventions to such women, alongside trained midwifery care, had been instrumental in reducing maternal mortality rates by 47 per cent between 1990 and 2010 (UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, World Bank 2012). It is interesting that in western countries those most likely to choose birth interventions (and also those less likely to breastfeed) are our own social Others, such as working-class and minority ethnic women (Kukla 2006; Brubaker 2007; Hildingsson, Radestad and Lindgren 2010; MacDorman, Declerq and Menacker 2010; Cammu, Martens and Keirse 2011), who may be stigmatized by natural birth and breastfeeding discourses while global Others are romanticized (see, for example, Millner 2012).

This fetishization of the 'natural' and non-western cultures also masks the fact that reproduction and parenting activism are highly commodified arenas. There is a variety of products in circulation, including birthing pools, balls, dresses and wraps, cooling sprays and moisturizers, TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) machines, breast pumps, nipple shields, pregnancy and breastfeeding pillows, slings, nipple creams, herbs to increase milk production, nursing bras and a huge range of books. Many activists receive revenue via their blogs and publications from placement and reviews of these products, as well as direct advertising. This

sits uncomfortably with their critiques of women requesting birth interventions as being conditioned by consumerist values (Glantz 2011), and their otherwise understandable opposition to aggressive formula marketing (see, for example, the Alpha Parent 2011; PhD in Parenting 2011). The growing industry of 'mommy bloggers', generally well-educated women in their thirties, is estimated to control around US$2 trillion worth of purchasing power in the United States (Basen 2012). In the United Kingdom, these bloggers have their own annual conference sponsored by corporations including Hewlett Packard, Disney, Lego, Twentieth Century Fox, Pampers, Johnsons Baby and Hyundai. In the United States, the Mom 2.0 Summit in 2012 was sponsored by corporations including Honda, Aldi, Dove, Intel and LG. Furthermore, many childbirth and breastfeeding support services are commercial (a doula can cost up to £1,000 for a birth and a private midwife up to £4,000 in the United Kingdom – see Donnelly 2011), even though they are often recommended as though there is no profit motive.

Identity politics and the privatization of responsibility

'Natural birth' and breastfeeding, then, are increasingly positioned within the domain of individualized consumer choice, and breastfeeding advocacy in particular often shies away from targeting the gendered structures which make women solely responsible for parenting and caring, and in fact can even emphasize these with the principle that nutrition and comfort should only come from the breast. It is relevant here that Nordic states with high rates of breastfeeding tend to have family-friendly policies in place (Gupta, Smith and Verner 2008), compared to the efforts to facilitate change in the United Kingdom, the United States and other countries through the behavioural rhetoric of 'breast is best'. This also points to broader policy contradictions: promoting breastfeeding without providing structural supports is not necessarily compatible with the welfare-to-work policies which have become popular in

the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere. The lack of acknowledgement of this is an insight into the privilege of breastfeeding activists, reflected in advice to let chores wait, sleep when the baby sleeps, or take a 'babymoon', which involves going to bed with the infant for several days. Lone mothers and women from disadvantaged social groups may face a variety of issues that are not compatible with such activities (Wolf 2007). Individualistic breastfeeding advice also ignores structural factors affecting child health such as inadequate pre- and antenatal care, poverty and shrinking welfare states (Wolf 2007), which are perhaps more important than the knowledge and attitudes prioritized within the contemporary politics of reproduction (see, for example, Schmied and Lupton 2001). This can be linked to the neoliberal privatization of responsibility: it is now a woman's duty to build a better baby through breastfeeding and her fault if her child develops allergies, infections or other conditions such as obesity (Wall 2001). Questions need to be raised about the complicity of reproduction activists in perpetuating such doctrines: indeed, in 1986 Adrienne Rich returned to her 1976 maternalist feminist classic *Of Woman Born* to critique the movement 'narrowly concerned with pregnancy and birth which does not ask questions and demand answers about the lives of children, the priorities of government; a movement in which individual families rely on consumerism and educational privilege to supply their own children with nutrition, schooling, healthcare' (1986 [1976]).

The new reproductive politics is largely concerned with representations of birth and breastfeeding and attitudes towards them rather than how they are structurally framed. A key element of breastfeeding activism, or 'lactivism', is the general public's reaction, with initiatives such as 'nurse-ins', 'flashmobs' where groups of mothers congregate and feed in public places, and campaigns to prevent social media sites such as Facebook from deleting pictures of mothers with their nurslings under obscenity rules. Nationally and internationally, there are breastfeeding awareness initiatives: World Breastfeeding Week (launched in 1992 and sponsored by a variety of organizations including UNICEF, the La Leche League and the WHO) is celebrated in more than 170 countries. In the

United Kingdom, National Breastfeeding Awareness Week began in 1993, and the withdrawal of central government funding in 2011 sparked a wave of protest (Boseley 2011). Indeed, news of a fall in breastfeeding rates during 2012–13 was attributed to the cutting of funding for this campaign (Boffey 2013a), with a lack of effort to counter public prejudice blamed for breastfeeding going 'out of fashion' (Turner 2013) or being deemed 'unnatural and abnormal' (Boffey 2013b) in some areas of the country. Such campaigns are an example of the politics of recognition (Fraser 1995, 2000), the identity-based activism in which issues around representation supplant those of structure and socio-economic redistribution (it is worth noting here that the largest declines in breastfeeding rates in the above example were in some of the most deprived areas of the United Kingdom). 'Natural' birth and breastfeeding have become part of an identity package around organic or holistic parenting (McDaniel 2009; Faircloth 2013), while formula feeding and birth interventions (and in particular, caesarean sections) form aspects of a negative Other associated with other practices such as 'cry-it-out', vaccination and corporal punishment. The names of some of the individuals and groups within the activist arena give an insight into the types of identities being constructed: for instance, Peaceful Parenting, Primitive Mommy, and The Natural Mummy Files. Primitive Mommy (www.primitivemommy.com) draws on a number of different themes as she describes herself as 'a devoted peaceful attachment mother of three, alternative medicine advocate, raw food loving, juicing enthusiast, Intactivist, babywearing, Earth loving hippy, Lactivist, altruistically trying to save the world from itself'.

Privilege, risk and the coercion of 'informed choice'

Similar to the shift from redistribution to recognition, Salecl (2010) has identified a shift from rights to choices in the reproductive arena. This is partly characterized by an understandable call to allow women to make informed and evidence-based choices

about what happens to them and their infants (see, for example, Romano and Lothian 2008). However, it is not clear whose evidence counts and studies are often cherry-picked, depending on their findings (Keirse 2010). Due to ethical issues, there are no randomized controlled clinical trials on normal birth or breastfeeding, so research is observational and highly prone to confounding (Joan Wolf 2007, 2011; Hoddinott, Tappin and Wright 2008; Donna 2011; Barston 2012), and the studies which are used are rather out of date (see, for example, Humenick 2006). Research on breastfeeding often also comes from developing countries where there are clear benefits to show, and it is questionable whether these persist at the same levels in western contexts where there are much higher vaccination rates and fewer issues with malnutrition and contaminated water (see, for example, Hoddinott, Tappin and Wright 2008). Furthermore, studies citing the benefits of breastfeeding to infants often ignore the fact that it may have detrimental effects on a women's physical, emotional or financial health (Barston 2012). It seems, then, that 'informed choice' is only as good as those doing the informing.

'Informed choice' can also be seen to have a coercive element if it involves women being educated about risk specifically in relation to birth interventions and formula feeding (see, for example, Goer 1999; Kennedy and Shannon 2004; InFact Canada 2006), and campaigns can be shaming and characterized by hyperbole (Joan Wolf 2011), for instance the comparison of formula feeding to tobacco use (Kukla 2006; Wolf 2007), or, in one Australian Breastfeeding Association class, to AIDS (Murray 2012). The construction of one 'right' choice is underpinned by national policies such as targets for reducing caesareans and international guidance such as the WHO Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes (World Health Organization 1981), which restricts the marketing of formula milks.[7] There is also a certain amount of frustration evident amongst activists at the failure to shape all women's choices in a particular direction. Lamaze educator Judith Lothian (2007), for example, argues that her organization needs to develop better marketing strategies, largely involving presenting the method as a means by which to make childbirth easier for women. Similarly,

Boyd (2006) contends that 'normal birth' advocates should take inspiration from campaigns such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, an American initiative which has been widely critiqued for its emotive strategies and zealotry (Balko 2002). In discussions of approaches such as 'advocacy labour support', there is an implication that midwives and antenatal educators should control what women are allowed to know in order to shape their choices (see, for example, Lothian 2007: 46). The curator of the US-based Leaky Boob activist website (2011) argues that women should not be told 'stories of breastfeeding doom and gloom' in an attempt at positive marketing. More dramatically, a 2013 report by UK charity Save the Children recommended that there should be cigarette-style warnings on boxes of formula milk. These examples all raise broader questions about how health promotion can be shot through with normalizing judgement (Gastaldo 1997) and sit uneasily with the movement's claims to be empowering to women, especially if this ultimately relies on misinformation and intimidatory tactics.

Within this framework of compulsory empowerment through 'informed choice', deviant behaviours are positioned as being a product of ignorance or weak-mindedness, rather than affirmative choices in favour of an alternative. This is clear in Lothian's (2007: 44) question: 'why are women seemingly uninterested in choosing normal birth, in spite of our best efforts?' There is an idea of false consciousness at work here: when women do not make the right choices, this is interpreted as proof that they are not getting the message (Kukla 2006). However, as Kukla (2006: 163) argues, many women who do not breastfeed are well aware of the risks: to explain away their choices is therefore to deny their agency. There are a number of legitimate factors here, such as a woman's physical health and the health of her baby, the needs of other children and family members, family living conditions and other demands on a woman's time and energy such as paid work (Schmied and Lupton 2001). Many of these factors are structural, and they challenge the formulation of birth and breastfeeding decisions as individual ones which can be shaped by behavioural interventions. There is a convolution here of popular western

'rational choice' arguments, in which 'normal' birth and breastfeeding are the outcome of sensible cost/benefit decision making, while electing alternatives is either irrationally driven or a product of rampant consumerism (the latter seen most prominently in discussions of women choosing caesareans for convenience – see, for example, Beckett 2005).

A version of the culture wars can also be seen playing out here, with women who choose childbirth interventions or formula feed (who are largely from working-class and minority ethnic groups) presented as ignorant and lazy or at best in need of education (which feeds racist and classist stereotypes – see Millner 2012). A generous formulation is that women lack the confidence to give birth without technology and need to be educated to trust themselves (Romano and Lothian 2008). For instance, Kennedy and Shannon (2004: 556) highlight American midwives' frustration with women who 'do not believe in their own strength'. Less judiciously, British activist the Alpha Parent (2011) blogs that formula companies 'exploit the lazy' – women who 'can't be bothered' – by claiming their products are convenient. There is a large group of lay 'experts' and professionals on hand to help women make the right choices, from lactation consultants to doulas to national and international organizations. Unfortunately, however, their activities often play into broader class and 'race' antagonisms in which the white middle classes judge other social groups as 'lacking' and attempt, through education and occasionally through ridicule, to force them into the dominant mode (see, for example, McRobbie 2004). This invisibilizes the important role of economic, social and cultural capitals: being able to choose a home birth, for example, often takes time and research and carries expense; and breastfeeding is not easily combined with paid work or other responsibilities. These factors perhaps explain why the most vocal advocates are extremely privileged women in western countries – in parts of the world with high rates of maternal mortality (and where most women deliver at home), activists are demanding more medical intervention (Johnson 2008). Choice, then, is inextricably linked to privilege.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced what I see as the new reproductive 'regimes of truth': the consensus around 'normal birth' and 'breast is best' which dominates policy, academia and the activist field. I have argued that these ideas have partly become hegemonic due to their strong connections with neoconservative and neoliberal rationalities, and that agendas which began in feminist efforts to empower women have now been transformed into messages which can put pressure on mothers in a number of different ways while excluding other caregivers. In my analysis, I have attempted to apply the principle of intersectionality: seeing the new reproductive activism as largely a politics of white, middle-class women with abundant cultural, social and economic capitals, I have explored how such agendas might intersect with the politics of class and 'race' and access to economic, social and cultural resources.

The new 'intensive motherhood' dovetails well with both neoconservative gender traditionalism and the neoliberal politics of personal responsibility. 'Natural' birth and breastfeeding are seen as defining characteristics of (biological) motherhood and a route to personal empowerment and bonding, with women who do not engage in such practices positioned as immature or lazy, or suffering from a false consciousness. In the absence of engagement with structural factors which hinder the achievement of 'intensive' or 'natural' motherhood, such ideas serve to reinforce neoconservative notions of motherhood as the route to women's self-actualization and their primary responsibility, and neoliberal agendas in which (biological) mothers are tasked with managing risk and ensuring their children's health through prescribed practices. This is linked to western middle-class 'healthism', which emphasizes personal accountability for health and disease prevention and often incorporates a suspicion of the medical and an allegiance to 'alternative' and non-western practices, through which the new 'natural motherhood' can be carried out. Such models rely on an uncritical acceptance of the idea of the 'natural',

as well as a romanticization of 'primitive' and 'traditional' cultures which often flies in the face of evidence related to maternal and child mortality in international and developing contexts.

Furthermore and perhaps paradoxically, the new reproductive agendas are highly achievement-focused, and natural birth and extended breastfeeding can be conceptualized as 'body projects' which are supported by a plethora of products and commercialized services. This feeds the identity politics which can be distinguished in this arena, with 'natural' parents being positioned against an Other associated with practices such as formula feeding and birth interventions. Furthermore, although birth and breastfeeding activists have a tendency to present themselves as counter-cultural, and identify themselves with global Others in their appropriation of 'traditional' practices, there is little attention paid to the stigmatizing effect this might have upon our own social Others, the working-class and minority ethnic women who may choose birth interventions or infant formula for a variety of structural reasons. Indeed, the discourse of 'informed choice' which underpins birth and breastfeeding politics largely ignores such factors, positioning 'wrong' choices as an effect of lack of education at best, or personal failure at worst. Such debates incorporate an element of coercion and ignore the fact that choice is to a large extent a function of privilege. The behavioural rhetoric which underpins natural birth and breastfeeding advocacy, in the absence of solid structural supports for mothers (and indeed, all parents), serves to vilify those with less access to resources and raises questions about the movement's concept of itself as being concerned with empowerment for all women.

Conclusion

This book has used a variety of different case studies and primary and secondary data to analyse sociologically the contemporary field of debate around four important issues in the politics of the body. In chapter 2, the cases of Julian Assange, Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Roman Polanski provided a way into the contemporary terrain of sexual violence politics. I identified a suspicion of victimhood and reluctance to moralize on the political and academic Left which chimes well with neoliberal individualism, and which has developed at least in part in response to the association of radical feminism with neoconservative agendas around crime and social control. I also highlighted two related backlashes: the right-wing backlash against feminism and the left-wing backlash against the United States, both of which I linked to left-wing ambivalence around feminist sexual violence politics. I acknowledged problems of positioning for feminism in relation to honouring the experience of sexual violence without playing into judgemental expressions of morality or punitive forms of regulation. This discussion resonated with the material presented in chapter 3, which examined the two main frameworks in the contemporary debate around gender and Islam. I uncovered similar challenges for feminist thought and

activism faced with contemporary imperialisms which manifest themselves in an Orientalist construction of the 'Muslim woman' as an eternal victim, used in the service of neoconservative political projects. I explored these right-wing discourses and the answering tendency within academia and the activist and political Left to focus on women's agency and resistance and celebrate cultural difference, with the attendant risk of invisibilizing gender-based oppression. I argued that on both sides there is dogma and essentialism, and that they share a number of themes drawn from the contemporary neoliberal context: a politics of recognition (and anti-recognition), which is homogenizing in its effects, and a rational-individualistic formulation of 'choice'.

These ideas were also situated as central to the sex radicalism explored in chapter 4 as the dominant extant political and intellectual framework around the sex industry. I again identified the influence of the neoliberal paradigm in shifting concerns about sexual freedom towards ideas about commodity choice and 'rational' decision making. I examined an emergent politics of recognition around sex work as an identity, which can be seen as a form of Orientalism in its fetishization of the 'marginal' but which also draws much from mainstream sexualized consumer culture. There are continued difficulties here in relation to radical feminisms which have become identified with neoconservative discourses in the debate around trafficking in particular. However, the postmodern and 'third wave' feminisms which underpin contemporary sex radicalism are also problematic in their associations with neoliberal rationalities and embodiment of privilege: those with economic and cultural resources are more likely to be able to choose to participate in sex work and also dominate the 'sex work glitterati' who are the principal representatives of the industry in activism, politics, academia and popular culture. Ideas about privilege also underpinned the discussion in chapter 5, which focused on the contemporary orthodoxy around natural childbirth and exclusive breastfeeding. I exposed resonances between these ideas, neoconservative gender essentialisms and the neoliberal politics of personal responsibility, and argued that agendas which originally developed in feminist attempts to empower have now become

normalizing discourses. I also argued that the practices they prescribe are largely the preserve of a class and ethnic elite, being resource-heavy and linked to western middle-class 'healthism', and that they exclude social Others while romanticizing global Others in their recognition politics around the 'traditional' and 'primitive'. The notion of 'informed choice' central to these debates was critiqued for being a coercive device which can produce shame and feelings of failure in women unable to make the 'right' choices for structural reasons. The themes explored in all four of these chapters are also evident in other arenas of body politics, for instance disability, where an emergent identity politics has set the concerns of disability rights activists against feminist formulations of choice (often overly rationalist) in the debate around abortion, or the beauty industry, where radical feminist condemnations of practices such as cosmetic surgery are juxtaposed with facile celebrations of women's agency which draw on both neoliberal and neoconservative discourses in their tendency to take normative femininities and capitalist structures as given.

All these debates are shaped in some way by marketized and individual-rational formulations of choice, associated with neoliberalism and its attendant politics of personal responsibility. In a neoliberal context, we are all responsible for creating our own destinies within a free market and we are also at fault in relation to our 'failures': this produces the contemporary populist suspicion of claims of victimization identified in relation to many of the issues discussed here. This contemporary individualism and emphasis on self-creation, regardless of one's social or economic position or experiences, conflates with the more progressive and postmodern intellectual preoccupations with agency that set themselves against the neoconservative appropriation of victimized women in the service of social and political control. The right-wing monopoly on morality and tendency to normalizing judgement shapes an answering inclination to relativize: however, this means that choice is often valorized as an end in itself, regardless of context, content or effect. The result is a focus on choices abstracted from the social structures which frame and constrain how women choose, for instance to commodify their bodies in the

sex industry or to cover them according to particular religious or cultural practices. Choice, then, exists only between a predefined set of alternatives set by structures such as the market or religious institutions, which are reified and taken as given. This is a rather minimalistic and consumerist formulation of agency which does not allow for discussion of how to improve the situations in which women choose, or to create alternative choices. Ironically, this also sometimes means that, in the current context, any choice made by a woman can be a feminist one.

The retreat of the structural can also be seen in the dominant political register of recognition, evident in the identity politics observed in many of the debates in this book. In general, a progressive and left-wing disposition towards the counter-cultural and marginal can be observed, which produces some rather contradictory alliances, for instance the radical Left's simultaneous support of 'sex positive' feminism and radical Islam. The oppressive strands of communitarianism which Fraser (1995, 2000) has identified are also in operation, for instance in the sex-radical personalization and psychologization of critique or the positioning of some Muslim feminists as traitors who have sold out to the West. A politics of 'voice' and 'authenticity' characterizes many of the issues, with ethnographic research, experiential narratives and lay expertise reigning supreme. It sometimes appears that the feminist adage 'the personal is political' has shifted from its original meaning – that personal experiences are framed by broader political structures – to now denote that personal stories are political in themselves, often devoid of any overarching analytical framework. As Fraser (1995, 2000) predicted, this often has a silencing function in relation to those seen as unqualified to speak. Although this is understandable given the history of dubious and ill-informed interventions into all the fields discussed, particularly on the part of neoconservatives and some radical feminists, it is unsound when one considers that 'voice' often continues to be the property of the privileged, whose claims to speak for a variety of others have been problematized by empirical evidence. Indeed, using an intersectional frame for analysis undermines many of the orthodoxies explored in this book.

Of course, some generalizations can and should be made: as Mohanty argued in 2002, globalized capitalism is a structure which impacts upon most if not all of us, and it certainly makes its presence known in all the issues covered here. The core of my structural analysis is constituted by the economic and political rationalities and practices of neoliberalism and neoconservatism: the hegemony of this contemporary coalition can be observed in all the debates in this book, particularly as it impacts upon left-wing and progressive academic and political discourses. I have identified a backlash on the Left against neoconservative frameworks, which maps onto other dichotomies, for instance between oppression and freedom, and victimization and agency, and has embraced other political movements which share its anti-imperial stance. This has led to some contradictory political alliances, and the gender essentialism of the neoconservative framework and its focus on women's victimization as a tool of social control has produced gender-blindness among some of its opponents, and a defensible yet risky refusal to engage with issues around women's oppression in contexts where this might feed neo-imperialist projects. The convergence between neoconservatism and radical feminist politics and activism around issues such as sexual violence and sex work has also produced, in areas of the Left, a reversion to backlash constructions of feminism as anti-sex, anti-men, anti-fun and pro-censorship. This positioning of 'feminism' (or sometimes radical feminism) as bogeyman in different ways within various contexts, which often involves the attribution of psychological hang-ups or dubious motives to individual feminists, is proof enough that the backlash has had significant reach.

This book is entitled *The Politics of the Body*: however, it often seems that women's bodies and experiences are lost in this shifting and frequently fraught discursive terrain. Positions taken in the contemporary political field regularly appear dictated by oppositional logics, rather than underpinning value or conceptual systems, and 'women's issues' are caught up in broader political struggles, in particular that between the Left and the neoconservative Right. Indeed, although throughout this book I have used the terminology 'Left' and 'Right' to facilitate description and

analysis, these terms are problematic, and it is evidenced in all the debates covered that positions in terms of gender cannot be clearly articulated in relation to this political dichotomy. This brings to mind Duggan's (2003) assertion that contemporary progressives have been pushed by neoliberalism into bitterly opposing camps, while failing to recognize that which divides them. It can also be argued that the hegemony of the contemporary neoconservative/neoliberal political coalition is such that attempts to distance from one of these rationalities often involves the mobilization of the other: arguments against neoconservatism frequently collapse into neoliberalized formulations of 'choice' as an end in itself, the politics of personal responsibility or apolitical ideas about difference, set against right-wing co-optations of women's victimhood. This can be observed in contemporary feminist frameworks such as the postmodern, postcolonial and 'third wave', where attempts to reclaim and celebrate women's agency can sometimes veer into facile voluntarism or consumerist notions.

This is an incredibly challenging political context in which to operate, and this book undoubtedly asks more questions than it answers. However, I hope it has offered an analytical framework for a number of key contemporary issues to do with women's bodies which might facilitate reflection and discussion in arenas both activist and academic. In terms of ways forward, I am afraid I do not have a clear programme to offer: however, I have always found feminism to be an incredibly reflexive political and academic movement and hope that attempting to foster contemplation upon its contemporary discursive and ideological positionings might germinate alternative languages and concepts. Furthermore, although the recent resurgence of youth feminist debate and activism in a number of countries worldwide (Baumgardner and Richards 2010; Pedersen and Salib 2013; Redfern and Aune 2013) has already become ensnared by the neoliberal/neoconservative dialectic in some instances (seen here for example in the discussion of Slutwalk), its simultaneous promise of fresh ideas, dialogues and relationships gives me plenty of hope for the future.

For Fraser (2013), the current international crisis of neoliberal capitalism offers opportunities for feminism. This is a cheering

thought – perhaps some neoliberal certainties will be (or already have been) shaken, and feminists may find a position of opposition to neoconservative regulation which does not automatically play into market-based conceptualizations of freedom. Such a position would create spaces for the articulation of values which do not slip into unhelpful moralizing but which also move away from consumerist formulations of choice. It would pay attention to the context of choices and also their effects, understood in a non-individualistic sense: how economic, social and cultural structures both shape our agency and are shaped by it. For me, this is the work of reinserting politics into feminism in a moment in which issues of identity have taken centre stage. This does not mean jettisoning the intersectionality principle; far from it: instead, it requires attempting to understand this as a structural, as well as an experiential and performative, dynamic, as shown by the application of ideas of economic and social privilege to many of the issues in this book. Perhaps something can be learned here from feminism in non-neoliberal settings, for example Venezuelan Chavismo, where the 'feminization of resistance' is rooted in the structural conditions of women's lives and a participatory collectivist politics which is explicitly opposed to neoliberal individualism and competition and thus attempts to subvert, often from within, capitalist social relations (Fernandes 2007; Motta 2013). It is important not to romanticize such examples and to remember that the influence of the neoliberal/neoconservative dialectic can probably be felt across the globe. We must also not forget, as shown in this book, that socialism is not immune from misogyny. However, examining pockets of resistance which are not wholly determined by neoliberal/neoconservative rationalities could provide potential ways in which to revitalize the feminist politics of the body, reconnecting the personal with the political, instead of positioning it as an end in itself.