



Research Article

© 2023 Yuxuan Xue.

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Received: 25 March 2023 / Accepted: 20 June 2023 / Published: 5 July 2023

A Platonic Alternative to Neoliberal Feminism

Yuxuan Xue

27 King's College Circle,
University of Toronto,
Toronto, Ontario (ON),
Canada

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2023-0089>

Abstract

Coming after two previous waves of feminism, neoliberal feminism has emerged in the public arena with strategies such as empowerment and self-choice. Situated at the intersection of the commodity economy, differentiated goods, and consumerism, this form of feminism encourages women to compete for power and status in economic terms. While it seems popular with many women, neoliberal feminism may have the potential to exacerbate internal divisions and gender antagonism while ignoring the original purpose of women's quest for affirmative action. Using a theoretical approach derived from Plato's thought, I discuss in this paper the role of economic competition in the neoliberal transformation of gender issues into a class issue. Such a transformation, I argue, could undermine the position of women by consigning them to an endless struggle for economic success.

Keywords: Neo-liberalism, Plato, Feminism, market feminism

1. Introduction

Neoliberal feminism is gaining traction among women, and more and more large companies are using feminist business strategies to increase their market share among female customers. These strategies involve creating images of independent, all-powerful women to motivate female consumers to spend, work, and feel that they should be polished and take responsibility for their social status. Such a life may sound exciting, but, in fact, such business practices may not be advancing gender equality so much as a new stereotype of women. The widespread commercial portrayal of the perfect woman turns a general imperative that all women be respected into a conditional proposition that only women who keep struggling deserve respect.

Also, in the course of its development for the purpose of market expansion, neoliberal feminism has led to two particular problems: gender antagonism and internal divisions among women. An exploration of the issues raised by neoliberal feminism is needed because the gender dichotomy that it assumes misconceives the influence of men's rights. Rights, whoever enjoys them, are not simply there for the taking. The transformation of rights is achieved when various people claim them, making them a collection of wishes. The gender dichotomy opposes men's rights to women's interests, leading to the mistaken impression that gains by women must come at the cost of sacrifices by men and thus making it difficult for them to support feminist causes. Regarding the potential for

neoliberal feminism to turn women against each other, the problem here is the notion that women's concerns are class-specific and that individual women should seek to acquire privileges rather than forming a movement that takes into account the interests of all women. Much of the discussion in the past has concerned the pros and cons of neoliberal feminism in contrast with other forms of feminism. Reflection on Plato's attitudes toward women in constructing the ideal city-state and his view of humanity and the soul can help eliminate antagonism and internal disunity and, I suggest, offer a fresh perspective on these issues.

2. The Problem of Neoliberal Feminism

Scholars distinguish three waves of feminism as women bravely demanded equal pay for equal work in the previous century. In the present century, neoliberal feminism has emerged as a new wave of feminist discourse, an extension of liberalism from social organization to the individual (Brown, 2006). Neoliberal feminist discourse encourages women, especially young women, to take control of their lives, transform themselves, and assume responsibility for their position in society (Gill & Schaefer, 2011).

Capitalism has often been viewed as a patriarchal system incompatible with the demand for female equality, so some governments have developed policy instruments to balance the capitalist free market with support for women (McCloskey, 2000). Neoliberal feminism, in practice, intersects in many ways with consumerism and capitalism, and the empowerment of women that it advocates emphasizes the commodification of difference, self-regulation, and freedom of choice (Gill, 2007). The argument is that capitalism and consumerism can provide women with a sense of transformation and empowerment. Thus, consumerism in the context of neoliberal feminism also acts as a kind of female self-management (Brown, 2007). The claim is that empowerment and self-management can transform women from objects into subjects (Gill, 2007). In other words, neoliberal feminism suggests that women become agents by struggling continuously and choosing freely. When they advocate for themselves consistently, women do not need to live a life in which their value is attached to others. Many scholars mention that one of the sources of the theory of neoliberalism is Foucault, at least in terms of its development, from whose perspective neoliberalism represents a new type of political subject organized by the free market. This political subject removes the boundary between society and the economy. At the same time, neoliberal discourse encourages women to be proactive in their social practices by seeing themselves as subjects of interest (Oksala, 2013).

These neoliberal feminist visions seem to amount to a strategy for women to find subjectivity and compete for power. In practice, however, the development of neoliberal feminism has gradually led to two social problems. First, neoliberal feminism has created a division of interests among women, turning feminism into "partial feminism." Second, it has exacerbated the already antagonistic relationship between men and women. The original aim of feminism and egalitarianism was to elevate the rights and interests of all women, in which respect traditional feminism is an all-purpose proposition. From the perspective of neoliberal feminism, by contrast, the movement for affirmative action is a process of fighting for economic resources and rights, the aim of which is not to uplift all women but rather only a specific class of women. Thus, neoliberal feminism transforms the affirmative action movement into the conditional proposition that women should struggle and practice self-discipline to gain power. Such demands that women take responsibility for their status are problematic because of their implications for the rights of women with limited economic power. Many highly educated women have gained a corporate voice and influence in this culture while other women, because of their low education or status, have been forced amid the increasing competition into even worse jobs and work environments (Eisenstein, 2016).

Currently, then, women remain, on average, worse off economically than men, with larger percentages of them requiring social services or relying on public institutions. In short, the impact of neoliberalism on the public sector in reducing spending and resources falls disproportionately on the female population.

Oksala pointed out that, while women may face difficulties under neoliberal regimes as a result of cuts in public spending, public programs depend on women as well as a country's economic development. So, when a country's economy is stagnant, funding for redistributive programs that benefit women may become scarce (Oksala, 2013). Therefore, if resistance to neoliberal policies frustrates efforts to improve a country's economic conditions, the result may be a loss of funding for such programs. Oksala argues that, for this reason, neoliberal feminism deserves broad support.

Leaving aside the accuracy of Oksala's assessment of the economic arguments in favor of neoliberal feminist policies, these ideas, again, seem merely to transform gender issues into class issues. Further, such a shift may not reflect the impact of female affirmative action per se, in that traditional feminist affirmative action movements sought to end discrimination against and unequal treatment of women, whereas neoliberal feminism involves middle- and upper-class women working their way into a class free of discrimination. The aim of the former is, then, to raise the status of a class of people to achieve rights equal to those enjoyed by others in society, and the aim of the latter is to raise the social status of particular women using class as a proxy.

So, to the extent that women belong to a particular class, class pressure can be recognized. Likewise, Oksala's argument that neoliberalism is preferable to traditional feminism because it offers women the ability to do so at least the opportunity to compete for upward mobility is cogent (Oksala, 2013). In any case, however scientifically the neoliberal market is interpreted, neoliberal feminism has consistently failed to address the implications of its approach to feminist struggle, for feminism has never been about acceding to the demands of women and then doling out affirmative action to help them realize their goals. Rather, feminism has represented a call by the world's women to be respected as subjects at all times and for some of the inequities to which they are subject to be ameliorated.

I am not, of course, arguing that the advancement of women's status is independent of economic resources. Rather, my point is that this association between economics and status is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship. The equality between men and women is important, indeed, fundamental, and needs to be addressed urgently. In its absence, men will not respect women, however great their economic success, but will continue to treat women of low status harshly and deprive them of resources. As a result, any partial feminism lacking a commitment to equality will inevitably benefit individual women rather than the female population. Neoliberal slogans may seem optimistic and idealistic, and the advancement of women may seem to be the concern of at least some advocates of neoliberalism, but the neoliberal enterprise overall increases the barriers to the achievement of gender equality.

3. Plato and Feminism

Plato's philosophy has been the subject of heated debate in feminist literature. Some scholars argue that Plato was, in the context of his time, an advocate for women, while others argue that he not only disrespected women but suffered from gynophobia. My aim here is to discuss the usefulness of Plato's philosophy for understanding, refuting, or revising neoliberal approaches to feminism. Given the lack of scholarly consensus, it is necessary first to clarify some of Plato's opinions regarding the issues of interest here. If Plato did, in fact, fear or hate women, his arguments need to be interpreted accordingly. Likewise, if Plato sometimes being viewed as hostile to women, his ideas are unlikely to seem relevant to feminist discourse.

There are two main arguments that Plato was uninterested in improving the status of women. On the one hand, Annas pointed out that Plato does not consider women's interests when formulating the policies of the city-state (Annas, 1976). On the contrary, in the *Laws*, he suggests that coercion is needed for a communal system (*Laws* 780a), and Annas suggested that the use of coercion as a means to promote policy implementation means that, if women are not willing to participate in public life or fulfill their obligations to the city-state, they will be forced to do so and that, therefore, Plato's policies do not reflect respect for women's wishes (Annas, 1976). Accordingly, Annas argued

that feminists should respect Plato's theory. Annas's conclusion in this regard seems correct. Thus, for example, Plato's recommendation that women participate in education is not based on a consideration of what women deserve but rather on the notion that the city-state loses half of its potential when women are not involved in public life. The inability to fully exploit its resources is a detriment to the city-state's interests (*Laws* 805a-805b). Whether Plato designed his ideal city-state with women in mind is irrelevant here, though, since, as discussed, the argument concerns, not whether Plato was a feminist, but rather what can be learned about contemporary feminism from a consideration of his philosophy.

On the other hand, it has been argued that Plato was not simply indifferent to women but actually gynophobic. Thus, some scholars have observed that, though Plato's ideal city-state represents an improvement in the status of women compared with their status in ancient Greek society, he elsewhere uses language that has discriminatory implications for women. Caccia, for example, cited *Republic* 373c, where one of the characters complains that "...we must enlarge our city...Or don't you think that we'll need tutors, wet nurses, nannies, beauticians...? We didn't need... in our earlier city, but we'll need them in this one" (*Republic* 373c). In this case, Plato links the common women's occupations with the unhealthier city (Lewis, 2012). Furthermore, in Book III of the *Republic*, Socrates discusses bad qualities that, he argues, are unique to women, such as the cowardly act of lamentation (*Republic* 387e-388a). Thus, Plato's frequent association of negative words with women and use of them as a metaphor for inferiority are at least suggestive of sexist tendencies. Plato's ambivalent view of women is exemplified in the statement in Book V of the *Republic* that "Men and women are essentially the same in defending the city, except that one is weaker and the other is stronger" (*Republic* 456a). The first half of this statement affirms that men and women are equal, but the second half affirms that women are weaker. Caccia suggested that this statement may not be absolute (Lewis, 2012), in that the context is Socrates's assertion of the superiority of the female gender in some respects, albeit associated with low social status, such as weaving and cooking (*Republic* 455 cd). Annas argued that Plato is saying that women may have an advantage because these jobs lack status and are poorly paid and thus are of no interest to men (Annas, 1976). Caccia concluded that Plato expresses two views about women that were extreme in his time (Lewis, 2012). One is positive, associating women with philosophy, and the other is negative, associating them with tyranny. Again, then, whether or not Plato was actually gynophobic, his philosophy may offer arguments that support the equality of women in society.

Returning to the assertion in Book V of the *Republic* regarding the qualifications for the guardians of the ideal city-state about the equality of men and women (*Republic* 456a), Hulme interpreted it in the context of professionalism. That is, in the ideal city-state, citizens should engage in exercise and work according to the strict division of labor consistent with their nature (Hulme, 2021). She suggested that Plato's view very much reflects the world as he experienced it. I interpret this statement as indicating that there is no difference in the nature of people based on whether their biological sex is male or female, but, in the era Plato lives in, women usually being viewed as lacking qualifications to participate in poetry, politics, building city-states, and sports. Mainly in these respects, I suggest, Plato believed that women were weaker than men.

Plato also argues in Book V of the *Republic* for the unity of the souls of men and women using the example of doctors: a male and a female doctor "have the same nature" (*Republic* 454cd). In other words, gender does not affect how an individual practices a particular profession, a view that seems to contradict the statement that women are weaker than men. Earlier (*Republic* 451e-452a), Plato claims that, if women are expected to do the same things that men do, they need to be given the appropriate education, i.e., in poetry (*Republic* 451e-452a). This statement makes clear that Plato attributes the inability of men and women to do the same things to the fact that society does not distribute educational resources equally. If Plato's earlier statement that women are weaker than men were meant to apply to all groups for which the biological sex is female, his arguments would be contradictory. The apparent contradiction further suggests that Plato's statement about the weakness of women (*Republic* 456a) is limited, reflecting the fact that women in Athens at that time were

usually not educated (*Republic* 456a). This lack of education was, from Plato's perspective, the result of a faulty social distribution system, his disapproval of which is apparent in his discussion of the ideal city-state, under which men and women would have equal access to education.

Admittedly, Plato's statement does not endorse gender equality. My point, though, is that it is often misunderstood as hostile to women. Rather, I suggest, the statement appears where it does in the *Republic* to prepare for the subsequent construction of an ideal city-state in which men and women are equal. So, while this statement is very much at odds with modern progressive notions of gender, it seems misleading to describe Plato as a misogynist. Overall, therefore, concerns about whether Plato was a misogynist or suffered from gynophobia are not pertinent to the larger argument presented here.

4. Application of Plato's Thinking about Women

Regarding ideas in Plato's thought that may be instructive for modern notions of feminism, first, I begin with the notion of philosopher-king and the distribution of material resources or property as a right. Plato's philosopher-kings are described as individuals who have no desire to pursue material goods or property since they perceive the world as it truly is. Neoliberal feminism, as discussed, rests on the notion that the accumulation of wealth and the elevation of social status is the appropriate means for individuals to assert their rights. The argument that those at the pinnacle of society, the philosopher-kings, should have no interest in material wealth is clearly inconsistent with the neoliberal ideal and, perhaps, points to a better way to achieve feminist goals.

In Book II of the *Republic*, Plato expresses the concern that those guided by materialistic desires tend to plunge the city-state into endless battles when in power:

"...if beggars hungry for private goods..., thinking that the good is there for the seizing, then the well-governed city is impossible...and this civil and domestic war destroys these people and the rest of the city as well" (*Republic* 521a).

Plato's description of the rulers of the city-state as beggars may seem out of place since, at least from a modern perspective, it is difficult to conceive of a person who can lead a city-state as lacking in economic power. However, according to Plato's definition of affluence, a rich person is one who knows what is genuinely good and lives by reason. For him, only when led by such a person can the city-state achieve a better public life.

Plato's argument, then, is that rulers who seek tangible possessions lock their city-states into endless struggle. Obviously, there are a finite amount of tangible assets that can be possessed. Ostwald interprets Plato as claiming that the body needs various material goods to survive, the pursuit of which leads inevitably to wars for the control of resources (Martin, 2009). In Plato's view, this outcome is essentially the result of a collision between the desire to possess more and the reality of limited resources.

From the perspective of Plato's endless struggle, the neoliberal feminist approach to the pursuit of power seems bound to lead to further conflict, making it difficult for the issues associated with women's rights to be resolved. As discussed, neoliberal feminism empowers women through differentiated goods, self-selection, and other methods, encouraging self-determination and taking responsibility for their social status. In other words, neoliberal feminism encourages women to gain power through economic competition (Oksala, 2013), which can be seen as a form of the battles described by Plato for resources using human energy as well as time that may prove never-ending.

Plato's theory of the ideal city-state, in relation to human nature, offers a theory that downplays conflict and emphasizes equality. This theory suggests a means to ameliorate the internal divisions and gender antagonism that neoliberal feminism exacerbates. Going beyond the simple struggle for power, the ideal city-state provides a clear paradigm for social change through the efforts of groups rather than individual women. In such a place, as has been seen, Plato suggests that no difference

exists, on the level of the soul, based on an individual's gender. He does not, of course, argue that men and women are identical. However, while this lack of distinction exists only at the level of the soul, Plato famously values the soul more highly than any other aspect of an individual. Thus, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates declares that the soul is immortal, while the body affects its pursuit of what is true and real. Plato does not, then, consider physical qualities the proper criteria for judging an individual's merits of people.

Having clarified this point, I return to Plato's belief in the unity of male and female souls. In the passage from Book V of the *Republic* cited earlier, Plato uses the examples of bald and long-haired shoemakers and male and female doctors, arguing that it would be ridiculous to allow bald men to mend shoes but not long-haired men since an individual's hair does not affect his work as a cobbler (*Republic* 453a-454e): shoemaking is a skill, and such a skill does not change because of such differences in appearance. By the same token, regardless of the social division of labor, gender does not affect the manifestation of ability, in which context Plato cites the example of a male doctor and a female doctor: gender does not affect their professional skills, which their natures support and are, indeed, the same. Therefore, the nature of the soul does not differ according to gender. By contrast, a male doctor and a male cobbler, though of the same gender, have different natures and abilities because their souls differ. In other words, Plato argues that the souls and talents of men and women do not depend on gender; rather, the distinct nature of individuals depends on their distinct natural abilities. Thus, "although there is clearly a distinction between male and female, this distinction is no more important than the distinction between bald and non-bald men" (*Republic* 454c) so that, "in a perfectly just city, both men and women would be qualified to be guardians..." (*Republic* 452a-e). For Plato, then, women are perfectly qualified to serve as physicians and supreme philosopher-rulers.

Returning to the neoliberal feminist notion that the struggle for material goods is a power struggle, it is from this perspective that equality for women is viewed as their responsibility to achieve. Since Plato holds that gender does not determine whether a human soul is superior or inferior, his ideal city-state involves women in activities that would otherwise exclude them in the design of his policies. Thus, his understanding of human nature associates egalitarianism with the essence of the human person more than the neoliberal understanding. Plato views equal rights and fair scrutiny as conditions that underlie the distinction in nature since there is no reason to treat people based simply on their gender. Another notion that is consistent with Plato's view regarding fair scrutiny is the notion that suggests any explicit or implicit demand for individuals to make extra efforts to achieve equality undermines their rights. Thus, neoliberal feminists' calling for women's self-empowerment in the pursuit of equality is inconsistent with Plato's view that individuals make distinctions between genders and that gender is not the object of distinction.

Neoliberal feminism has, indeed, drawn attention to a path to equality through which some women work to gain social status or respect and become empowered. In contrast with Plato's theory, neoliberal feminist arguments suffer from the increasingly evident flaw that they shift the baseline of affirmative action from the nature of the soul to women's personal struggles for equality. This shift is bound to exclude some women from equality in that it essentially substitutes discrimination based on class for that based on gender since only women who have opportunities to increase their economic power can expect to be treated equally; those who do not have such opportunities will remain in the same condition. Indeed, their status will further decline because of the contrast created by women who have exploited their opportunities to rise within the group. Plato's collective view places the baseline for equality and difference, by contrast, at the level of the soul.

I am not arguing that the advocates of market-based feminism are necessarily mistaken in their emphasis on the economic empowerment and efforts of women. My point, rather, is that such efforts are insufficient to secure gender equality. Plato likewise emphasizes the need for the citizens of city-states to improve themselves through participation in rituals, sports, and abstaining from the pursuit of merely physical pleasures. For the guardians of the ideal city-state, merit rather than gender is the significant consideration. By the same token, the efforts of women who achieve success do not result in true gender equality for them; rather, whatever respect they gain should be seen as social

advancement.

Another aspect of Plato's ideal city-state that is consistent with modern notions of feminism not rooted in neoliberalism is the elimination of gender antagonism through the redistribution of social responsibilities. In such a city-state, what was initially categorized as a family responsibility is a social responsibility. This situation may not be ideal to the extent that the female guardians may not have the right to choose their fertility and spouse, but it might be considered better than the situation that modern societies face. To be sure, Plato's vision has some deeply problematic aspects, in particular the practice of eugenics, for he advocated categorizing the citizens of the ideal city-state based on their natural abilities, represented in order of decreasing value as gold, silver, bronze, and iron. Since "children will resemble their parents" (*Republic* 415a), the guardians will produce offspring that meet the standards of their parents. Thus, Plato argues that only the class of guardians in the city-state should have the right to procreate, while the children of other classes may not have the opportunities to be raised by the city.

Further, according to Plato, "the conception of a guardian should take place during a feast day. There would be no religious blessing for a union outside the appointed time" (*Republic* 459e-460a), and the optimal age for childbearing is 20-40 years for women and over 55 for men. Based on these two conditions, it is possible to infer a policy that would lead to the result that female fertility is viewed as a contribution to the city-state. The recognition of this contribution allows women to remain in the guardian class. Since only women bear children, they need to bear at least two to maintain the city-state's population. Accordingly, the women between the ages of 20 and 40 among the guardians may have to give birth to several children to maintain the population of the city-state, and, since some women are infertile and Plato advises limiting conception at certain times when eligible women may not be available, the childbearing burden on the fertile female guardians would be even more onerous. Therefore, being subject to so many restrictions, the female guardians would not necessarily need to achieve the double task of protecting the family and bearing children; rather, having children becomes an alternative to defending the family. In other words, these two social responsibilities are considered to be on equal footing in what is, essentially, a redistribution of social responsibilities.

In the real world, at the macro level, amid the perception that the population in many countries is declining, family planning is a societal responsibility and obligation. Most people, though, see childbearing as a contribution to the family. When women's efforts are seen as largely a contribution to the family, it becomes challenging to garner social support for their productive labor. For example, a state policy might require companies to provide unemployment insurance to their employees, which is essentially a welfare benefit for the subjects of labor, but it would be difficult to extend this benefit to women who labor in the household since their contributions to the family could not be reflected collectively in society in the short term. In this case, if the division of labor between men and women remains the same, it would be difficult for women to gain equal social power.

Plato's ideal city-state, on the other hand, replaces this antagonism between males and females with a distinction based on social and family responsibilities. Since procreation is part of the contribution to the city-state, it is recognized as a form of work on its behalf. From this perspective, women need not give up childbearing to devote themselves to the economic struggle to gain social equality and power, nor must they see men as enemies and believe that ignoring men's needs and amplifying women's needs is the path to egalitarianism.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, although neo-liberal feminism claims to achieve equality through market opportunities, this suggestion may bring more inequalities to a female that belongs to the lower class in the long term. Plato indeed lives in an era that is far from today, while his theory is that we should reduce our design for equality back to human nature and reconsider the phenomenal difference, such as women's potential. When by nature, women should have the same potential as men, efforts should

be made on how the world treats them more equally. Thus, the idea that suggests adjusting how women respond to the inequalities by asking them to pay more effort may need more reconsideration.

References

- Annas, J. (2009, February 25). Plato's Republic and feminism: Philosophy. Cambridge Core. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/philosophy/article/abs/platos-republic-and-feminism/91800D8D1FEC4E5E181A35DAAD763AFE>
- Brown, W. (2006). American nightmare. *Political Theory*, 34(6), 690-714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591706293016>
- Caccia, Jr., Lewis. (2012). The status of women among the guardian class: feminism in relation to Plato's Republic. *Atenea*, 32(1-2), 19+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A345461420/LitRC?u=anon~8444ffco&sid=googleScholar&xid=8a5b663b>
- Eisenstein, H. (2016). *Feminism seduced: How global elites use women's labor and ideas to exploit the world*. Routledge.
- Gill, R., & Scharff, C. (2011). *New femininities: Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Gill, Rosalind. (2007). Postfeminist Media culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147-166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>
- Hulme, E. (2021). First Wave Feminism: Craftswomen in plato's republic. *Apeiron*, 55(4), 485-507. <https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2020-0089>
- McCloskey, D. (2000a). Postmodern market feminism: A conversation with gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Rethinking Marxism*, 12(4), 27-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935690009359022>
- Oksala, J. (2013). Feminism and neoliberal governmentality. *Foucault Studies*, 32-53. <https://doi.org/10.22439/fss.voi16.4116>
- Peace and war in Plato and Aristotle. (2009). *Language and History in Ancient Greek Culture*, 69-90. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812206098.69>
- Plato, & Cooper, J. M. (2009). *Complete works*. Hackett.