

WHICH WAY IS FEMINISM LEANING? A CRITIQUE OF SANDBERG'S "FEMINIST MANIFESTO"

by Ashley Hartman Annis

Sheryl Sandberg, *LEAN IN FOR GRADUATES*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014. 432p. \$24.95, ISBN 978-0385353670. (Expanded from *LEAN IN: WOMEN, WORK, AND THE WILL TO LEAD*. Knopf, 2013. 240p. notes. index. \$24.95, ISBN 978-0385349949.)

Dawn Foster, *LEAN OUT*. London: Repeater Books, 2015. 87p. notes. pap., \$14.95, ISBN 978-1910924020.

What do we mean when we say “feminist book,” “feminist film,” or “feminist organization”? In order to consider something feminist, do we simply require that a woman be in charge? If one woman reaches a position of power, is it a victory for all women?

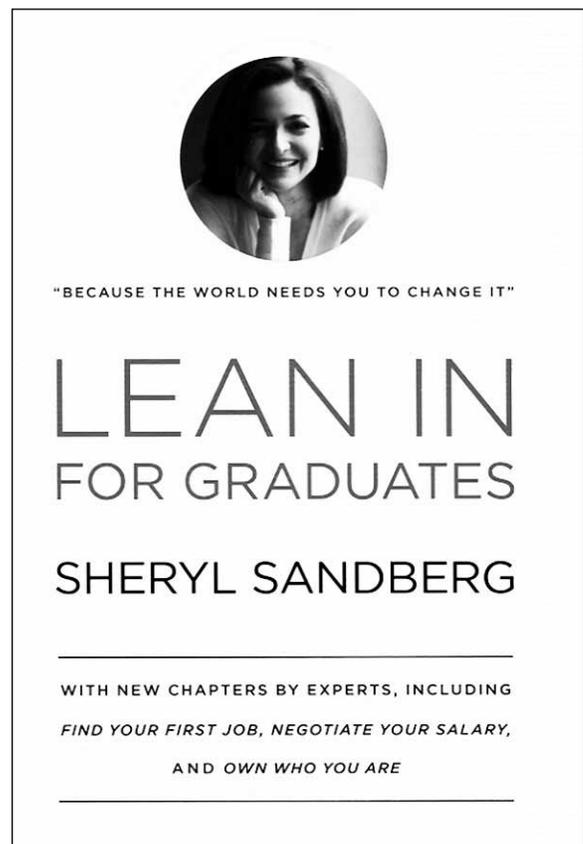
The answers to these questions impact the real, lived experiences of women as well as people in other marginalized populations. Two vastly different perspectives can be found in the books *Lean In*, by Sheryl Sandberg, and *Lean Out*, by Dawn Foster. Although both authors claim a feminist label, there are significant differences in their beliefs and approaches as they look at inequality and attempt to create change. *Lean In* argues for more women in positions of power in order to create trickle-down equality, while *Lean Out* calls for a complete overhaul of the current economic and political system. The juxtaposition of these perspectives shows how the feminist label can be used not only to represent opposing agendas but also to turn feminism into a watered-down, depoliticized commodity.

The experience of reading *Lean In*, by billionaire Sheryl Sandberg, felt nothing like reading a feminist text. In her introduction, though, Sandberg tries on the label, saying, “This book is not a memoir, although I have included stories about my life. It is not a self-help book, although I truly

hope it helps. It is not a book on career management, although I offer advice in that area. It is not a feminist manifesto — okay, it is sort of a feminist manifesto” (p. 11). She then spends more than 400 pages in the *For Graduates* edition explaining her belief that when individual women overcome internal barriers — fear of leadership, for instance, and low self-esteem — and rise to the top of major companies and corporations, women everywhere will experience these benefits, and equality will be achieved.

Sandberg tells her readers that women must learn to “sit at the table” — a phrase she pulls from the personal experience of sitting against the wall during important meetings instead of at the table with the bosses and leaders — and assert their ideas and needs in the corporate business world. She also constantly refers to the “Leadership Ambition Gap,” a concept backed by study after study showing that women are less likely to agree with such statements as “I aspire to a leadership role in whatever field I ultimately work”

and therefore less likely to gain power in companies and corporations. (Although I don’t doubt the truthfulness of these studies, I would be interested to learn what these women *do* aspire



to become and why a leadership role is undesirable, as perhaps it has nothing to do with their self-esteem.)

Although she devotes whole chapters to such catchy-sounding concepts,

Sandberg never explains exactly how they can be used to address the realities of patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism, or heterosexism. Her assumption seems to be that the only problems faced by women are their own fears and self-esteem issues. She even advises a “fake it until you feel it” approach, encouraging women to be nice, be pleasant, and smile, since doing so can help a woman more easily reach her career goals as well as strengthen her marriage. She almost acknowledges the absurdity of this position, but sticks to her advice, saying, “I know it is not a perfect answer but a means to a desirable end. . . My hope, of course, is that we won’t have to play by these archaic rules forever” (p. 61).

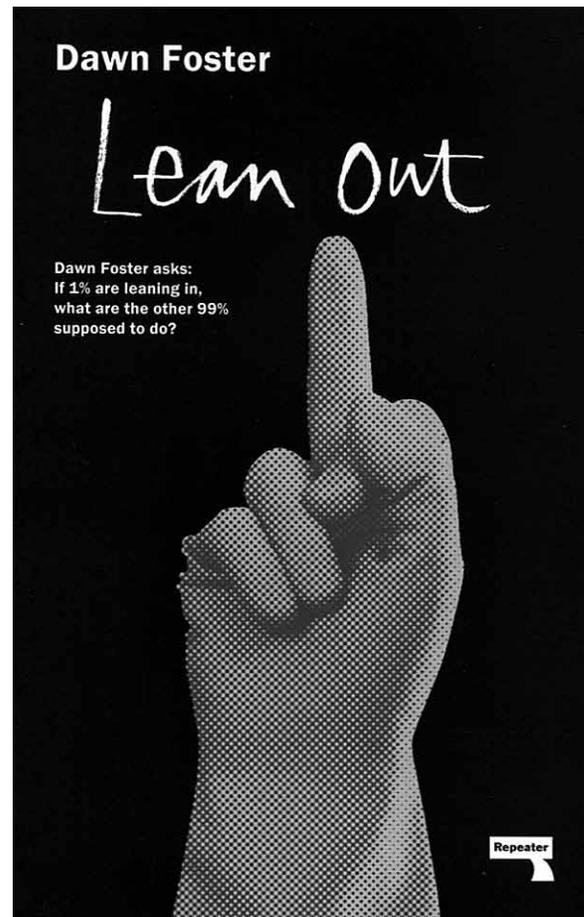
What Sandberg doesn’t mention, as she reveals personal tales of success and completely sidesteps the question of privilege, is that her approach to equality and her advice to women leave capitalism neatly intact and fail to address the institutional barriers that create and sustain many of the inequalities she claims to fight. Every now and then she seems to get close, tip-toeing for a brief moment at the edge of something important. She gives a slight nod, for instance, to such issues as unfair maternity and paternity leave policies in the U.S., the lack of income replacement for new mothers, and the difficulties of childcare, but she promptly backs off, shutting out any possible critique of the system in which she is so entrenched. During these moments I felt myself reading faster, asking, “Is she really going to go there?” But the answer was always, “No, she’s not.”

In order for Sandberg to really address the issues caused by structural inequalities — a discussion that would, in fact, make her book a feminist manifesto — she would have to recognize that gains made by individual women are not enough to produce

equality. When she does mention those issues, I wonder whether she realizes she is stepping into dangerous territory and backs off consciously, or whether the ways she has benefited from the current system are so embedded that her stopping point is unconscious — an instinctive way to protect herself. Sandberg would sink her own ship by truly addressing systemic issues like lack of maternal leave; instead, by backing off, she quickly patches up any tiny holes she has poked, and the book keeps sailing smoothly.

Regardless of Sandberg’s level of awareness, her advice to women is deeply flawed, her feminism is corporate and harmful, and Dawn Foster, author of *Lean Out*, knows it. In her small but mighty response to *Lean In*, Foster raises a middle finger to Sandberg and the capitalist market she supports and effectively takes down Sandberg’s airy message:

[It is] far harder to write a chirpy feature about [working-class feminism] because, like most aspects of working-class life, it becomes enmeshed in many other axes of oppression: class, disability, age, region, race, education all bind together to affect a person’s life chances. (p. 65)



Foster discusses the ways corporations like Dove and people like Sandberg co-opt feminism by watering down the message and potency of a movement about collective rights and equality. She points out the dangers of corporate feminism, individual feminism, and branded feminism, explaining that the attainment of leadership positions by individual women does not necessarily lead to better lives for women everywhere.

In one of her most powerful chapters, titled “Trickle-Down Feminism,” Foster looks at such women as Theresa May and Margaret Thatcher, who did not use their political power to ensure women’s empowerment and safety, but instead overlooked the abuse of women and supported legislation that disproportionately hurt them:

[T]he fact of [Margaret Thatcher's] power and her gender emboldens 1% of feminists to claim her as a feminist icon, purely by virtue of her sex and in spite of the fact she was clearly not an advocate of women's social and economic empowerment. There is no intrinsic tendency for women to support other women when competing class and power interests offer far more fruitful personal rewards. (p. 53)

Although Sandberg hasn't directly influenced policy in the ways, for instance, that Thatcher has, it's easy to see the connections: these are individual women in positions of power who are labeled feminist simply because of their gender, despite the reality that they are actually hurting the feminist movement.

If Sandberg never called her book a "feminist manifesto," if it wasn't on the *New York Times* bestseller list for

weeks, and if she didn't have a hashtag used by Beyoncé, Serena Williams, and Gwyneth Paltrow, we could all have shrugged this off and moved on with our lives. But those things did happen. As feminist students, teachers, and activists, we need to engage with who is considered a feminist icon, and why. The combination of *Lean In* and *Lean Out* is not only interesting to discuss in a feminist classroom, but also necessary for us all to wrestle with at a gut level if we want to strengthen and educate future feminist leaders.

Despite the emotional distress of reading *Lean In* in its entirety, I am thankful for the gender and women's studies class in which the updated graduates' edition of the book was required reading. I certainly wouldn't have picked it up on my own, but I realize the importance of grappling with and critiquing a text that, because of its mainstream popularity, needs to be addressed by feminist students and teachers.

The trick here is to see Sandberg's *Lean In* for what it really is: a self-help model; a brand; a well-timed speech, book, and website that can lead people to believe they are supporting equality and feminism when, in reality, they are supporting the very things feminism tries to work against. "Leaning in" may work for a few individuals, but the success and resulting benefits of a few will not magically transfer to the rest of the world's women. Instead, if we follow Dawn Foster and lean *out* — away from capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and individualism — feminism can do the work it needs to do and reach toward equality, even if we decide not to sit at the big boss table.

[Ashley Hartman Annis is a student, working on her B.A. in gender and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and a teacher, offering classes on menstrual cycle charting for health and hormone-free birth control. In her spare time she knits socks, walks her big fluffy dog, and watches *Battlestar Galactica* with her partner, Sam.]



Miriam Greenwald



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