

The female entrepreneur: fragments of a genealogy¹

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Abstract

This short article, based on a lecture, offers fragments for a genealogy of female entrepreneurship in the Global North. It argues that in business and management books and social texts, the entrepreneur has historically been overwhelmingly figured as male - as 'entrepreneurial man'. Yet over the past few decades, encouraged by both gender mainstreaming and neoliberal feminism, the symbolic locus of entrepreneurialism in popular culture has increasingly gravitated towards women. It shows how we might trace a mediatized evolution of female entrepreneurialism and its ideologies: from tragic 1950s entrepreneurial stars, through to the plucky shoulder-padded heroines of women's magazines and films of the 1980s, through to the girlbosses, Instagram entrepreneurs and hustle culture of the present. What, it asks, is happening to the female entrepreneur in an era of neoliberal crisis? And what 'left feminist' alternatives to, or intersections with this figure might be in our midst, or on the horizon?

Keywords

entrepreneurialism * female entrepreneur * feminism * girlboss * neoliberalism

The figure of the entrepreneur has been a characteristic feature of the neoliberal era. Entrepreneurialism is both an activity within contemporary capitalist culture, and is to a large extent representative of it: we are all incited to be entrepreneurs of the self – to construct 'brand me'. And yet the figure of the *female* entrepreneur – whilst being regularly understood as key to neoliberal feminism, whether in the form of the shoulder-padded businesswoman or more recently, the girlboss – still remains, interestingly, somewhat surprisingly under-theorised.

In this short piece I want to draw together fragments of these longer histories of the female entrepreneur over (and beyond) the past four neoliberal decades. In doing so, I am asking three main questions. First: how might we move towards producing a theoretical, intersectional and conjunctural analysis of the *longer* historical relationship between entrepreneurialism and feminism? Second: what happens to the female entrepreneur, this archetypal figure of 'socially liberal' neoliberal success — in an era of neoliberal crisis? Is she tasked with overcoming crisis, with being extra resilient, and carrying on through it as a good neoliberal subject, or is this resilience itself now being rejected? And third: what alternatives are there, and what alternatives are being figured, or bodied forth? Here I want to consider the current revival of interest in left feminist solidarities, in new forms of left feminism - and to ask if such activity involves rejecting, negotiating with or transforming entrepreneurialism.

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In the process of answering these questions, I want to offer a sketch of what could be called 'entrepreneurial eras', relating them to media texts in which ideas about female entrepreneurialism are promoted, negotiated and challenged. These fragments of a genealogy draw on a range of texts from cultural, media and business studies and social theory, as well as some of my previous, current, and embryonic work.

Histories

To begin with, let us look at something of the history of the entrepreneur. The emergence of the term 'entrepreneur' can be traced back to the eighteenth century Irish-French economist Richard Cantillon in his 'Essay on the nature of trade in general' (1723) which identified entrepreneurs as people who 'engage in market exchanges at their own risk to make a profit' (Herbert and Link 2009: 8). Whilst Cantillon's precise biography is unclear, we do know he made a fortune by selling shares in the boom-and-bust economy of the time; and that his essay had a wide influence, including on French liberal economist Jean-Baptiste Say, who argued passionately for 'free' markets and lifting industry restraints whilst working in the colonial sugar industry as well as the financial sector (Say 2001). Later, in the mid-nineteenth century, entrepreneurialism became popularized through the growth in the analysis of economics, particularly by the English economist William Stanley Jevons (Jevons 1881; Brewer 1992: 1). Many people, including influential left political theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, position the Austrian Joseph Schumpeter's work from the early twentieth century as the first significant theory of entrepreneurialism (Hardt and Negri 2017: 139-146). However, I think this earlier heritage of the term is also significant, and worth highlighting, for its connections to extreme inequality and to racial capitalism.

For his part, Schumpeter, who did so much to promote entrepreneurialism, was excited by the idea of the 'wild spirit' and innovation of entrepreneurs and is most well-known for his theories of 'creative destruction', which adapted Marx's insight that capitalism tended to destroy the wealth it had created. Instead of seeing such boom-and-bust cycles as a problem, Schumpeter celebrated them as part of a natural business cycle, whereby emerging companies destroying outdated 'old' ones helped encourage 'new' fashions.

If these ideas about entrepreneurialism's importance now seem in many ways to be 'common sense', that is partly because Schumpeter was an influential right-wing economist whose ideas, alongside those of his contemporaries Menger, Hayek and von Mises, were formative to the development of neoliberal theory (Dardot and Laval 2013; Davies 2014; Peck 2010). After their popularization via 1970s US management theory, these ideas were later picked up and implemented in political practice in a wide range of different geographical locations, from Chile to South Africa, from the US and the UK to the USSR and Poland (Klein 2013, Harvey 2007). With different manifestations, they shared an underlying logic and commitment to dismantling state protection and to extending competitive marketisation.

Neoliberal men

And thus, the idea of the capitalist entrepreneur and their project, the enterprise, as a model for society became dominant. This idea is in effect what Foucault traces in his 1978-9, lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics* (only translated into English 2004) where he boldly states that

I think the multiplication of the “enterprise” form within the social body is what is at stake in neo-liberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society. (Foucault 2004: 148)

Over the past three decades there has been a wide range of works analysing entrepreneurialism’s manifestations as part of neoliberal culture. This includes work on new forms of entrepreneurial self-fashioning, as extensively analysed in Ulrich Bröckling’s book *The Entrepreneurial Self* (2015), and work on its co-existence with precarity, so beautifully highlighted in the title of Silvio Lorusso’s book *The Entreprenariat* (2019). We have also seen a fair amount of work tracing its recent genealogies, including *The New Way of the World*, in which Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval take up Foucault’s theoretical baton (Dardot and Laval 2013). As I have noted before (Littler 2018) they have a chapter entitled ‘entrepreneurial man’, in which it is initially unclear if the title is a reflexive commentary on ‘man’ standing for all the genders; but soon becomes clear that there is no analysis of gender. Similarly, an earlier classic edited collection from 1991, *Enterprise Culture*, features solely male contributors (Keat and Abercrombie 1991). In such texts the gendering of the political rationality of entrepreneurial individualism is by default male.

Yet whilst a lot of these theories focus on men, female entrepreneurs of course have existed and do exist; and they have often been written about by female scholars – often with far less attention paid to their scholarship. In the following sections, I offer a brief sketch of some of the different representations and formations of female entrepreneurialism in the Global North.

Fordist female entrepreneurs

If we are to consider examples of female entrepreneurs, we might think of early celebrity brand names like Estée Lauder or Coco Chanel; or, down a class rung, of the popularity of Tupperware and Avon parties from the 1950s, where housewives sold plastic containers and make-up in US-European domestic spheres. In terms of their mediated visibility and cultural representation, female entrepreneurs of the mid-twentieth century who occasionally featured in film are often lonely and troubled. For instance, in 1945’s *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred achieves business success despite and through her difficult family circumstances, as a means to cope. Female entrepreneurialism fits around the melodrama mould and is not a social prescription but shown as born of desperation and is regularly fairly doomed. In *Lucy Gallant* (1955) Lucy finds that entrepreneurialism is not a particularly successful recipe for love. Such public figures were more exceptional than routine. Black female entrepreneurs were even less visible (for instance, it was not until 2020 that a TV series, *Self-Care*, was made about the first US black female millionaire entrepreneur from the turn of the twentieth century, CJ Walker).

It is also telling that the female entrepreneur’s existence was so regularly bound up with the private sphere and gendered forms of consumption, as it largely remains (Eikhof et al, 2013). Women in the public sphere tended to be waged labourers rather than entrepreneurs, and often the most badly paid – maids, cooks, shop assistants, nurses and cleaners. This did not significantly change until the third part of the twentieth century with the break-up of what Nancy Fraser terms the Fordist family wage, and the arrival of both women’s liberation and post-Fordism, in which the dual income, overworking neoliberal household was held up as the new ideal (Fraser 2013).

Shoulder-padded women

From the 1980s there was a huge number of female entrepreneurs being spotlighted and made luminous across magazines, TV and film, as women entered paid employment in more significant numbers. Notably, they were still often presented as starting industries about heavily feminised consumer goods, such as US homestyle guru Martha Stewart. Rags-to-riches tales were rebooted and popularised, such as Barbara Taylor Bradford's bestselling novel turned TV series, *A Woman of Substance* (1985) about a servant who ends up as the wealthy owner of a department store.

A book published at this time at Birmingham's Centre for Cultural Studies, *Off-centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, is a text that now gets relatively little attention, unlike that given to *Policing the Crisis*, the text primarily by men at the Centre on mugging. Yet it is important, in part because it predates the slew of Foucauldian-inspired work on the 'management of the self' in neoliberal culture by over a decade; but also because it draws together interdisciplinary analyses of how women were addressed as new right-wing subjects, a phenomenon that was formative to the success of neoliberalism in many countries (Frankin, Lury and Stacey, 1991; discussed in Littler 2018). For instance, Estella Tincknell analysed how *A Woman of Substance* both offered an aspirational fantasy and actively popularised the ideology of the individual bourgeois woman who could 'make a space for herself' within capitalism by bypassing solidarity: a world where 'one woman at a time can sit at the boardroom table' (similar to 'the golden skirts' motif in Norway). As Tincknell says, this is a fantasy of the neoliberal Margaret Thatcher era that offers a kind of 'magical femininity' in which success is presented as a matter of dressing well, using the right attitude and feminine authority. Similarly, Janet Newman's chapter 'Enterprising women' tracked the 1980s appeal of the new manuals and magazines encouraging women to become entrepreneurial, to think they can 'have it all' through careful time management rather than through changing social structures. Crucially, Newman connects its varied appeal – of galvanising ambition, newness, developing the self – to the extremely limited actual work opportunities available to women at that time. These cultural studies works therefore show how, in the 1980s UK, shoulder-padded ambition cathected a sense of female empowerment to a wish to earn vast quantities of money and to reshape the world of work and its problems, even though it often couldn't name those problems at a structural level.

Diversifying female enterprise

As Angela McRobbie's work across a number of books from the 1990s has shown, the labour market's increasing insistence on flexible, entrepreneurial subjects meshed with the gender settlement to produce an array of social types - ranging from the phallic 'top girls' who disavow feminism to the more recent strand of corporate liberal feminism that ostensibly 'takes feminism into account' (McRobbie 2008, 2023). Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg was the poster woman for such entrepreneurial feminism, telling us that we just have to 'lean in' to corporate culture (Rottenberg 2018).

From the 1990s new varieties of female entrepreneurialism started to become encouraged. The figure of 'the mumpreneur', as I discuss in my book *Against Meritocracy* (2018) was pitched at women to compensate for gendered inequalities in the post-war welfare state settlement. It was suggested to women who had newly become mothers that they set up businesses from their kitchen table, as if they didn't have enough to do already. Such aspirational figurations were dangled before women as a means of offsetting the lack of affordable childcare and decent maternity and paternity leave. They were used, in other words, to paper over the cracks.

The interpellation to be entrepreneurial as a route to success was particularly targeted at those with less economic, cultural and social capital and prior privilege. The spotlighting of both working-class people and people of colour as being successful examples of entrepreneurialism, as ‘parables of progress’, intensified in the new socially liberal, neoliberal meritocracy (Littler 2018). Why bother providing social structures equalising life chances when people could just be incited to do it on their own and castigated when they failed? This neoliberal message, as Sherene Idriss and Paul Gilroy have shown, intersected with longer racialised traditions and genealogies of ‘hustle culture’ (Gilroy 2013; Idriss 2021).

In addition, by the 2000s and 2010s there was the emergence and mainstreaming of what Sarah Banet-Weiser later calls ‘popular feminism’ (2018) – whereby feminism is no longer unfashionable (à la postfeminism) or kicked away, but rather proudly embraced by the mainstream, encapsulated by Beyoncé singing in front of the large word ‘feminist’. With popular feminism, and the rise of what’s sometimes called the ‘fourth wave’ of digital feminism, we therefore have the emergence of adapted and mutated formations of gendered enterprise.

Precarious girlbosses and recession

Key to this formation from the turn of the century is that younger women were encouraged to be ‘girlbosses’ (Lukan 2022). This term was popularised by the 2015 book by Sophia Amoruso, detailing her career setting up a fashion company which ‘inspired’ a 2017 Netflix series of the same name (Amoruso 2015). The infantilisation of the moniker is extremely telling – we don’t hear of boybosses (just as we don’t hear of ‘dadpreneurs’). Crucially, there has been the widespread use of social media to conduct entrepreneurial activities, alongside an intensification of forms of branding the self – of entrepreneurial self-fashioning – on social media (Hearn 2008). This has involved the opening-up of new sales techniques as well as anxieties about lack of regulation, surveillance and the extension of more intimate forms of blurring between personal and working lives: particularly for young women, as emblematic users of sites like Instagram and TikTok (Gill 2023).

Wealthier entrepreneurial feminists were encouraged to join glossy suites of clubs oriented to women (like ‘The Wing’) which featured in *Elle* and *Vogue* and were fictionalised in later seasons of US TV series *The Bold Type* (2017-21) dramatizing the lives of young, socially liberal and sporadically politically conscious workers at ‘Scarlett’ magazine. Yet as times grew tougher, and working landscapes grew even more precarious and tenuous, the figure of the feminist entrepreneur also became differently calibrated.

After the 2008 financial crash, for instance, representations of entrepreneurs making it through tough times became more noticeable in their frequency (Negra and Tasker 2013). The 2011 comedy *Bridesmaids*, for instance, opens with a young woman dealing with the closure of her cake shop – but she is seen baking again by the end (Negra and Tasker 2013: PPP). Likewise, whilst the film *Joy* (2015) and the Disney animation *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) are both set in different pasts – the 1920s and the 1980s - they are both post-financial crash films dealing with overcoming hardship as well as intersectional disadvantage. They foreground dynamics of class and race whilst also depicting women overcoming huge difficulties to produce, respectively, their restaurant business and a self-wringing mop. More recently, the cost of living and the Covid crisis has also helped shape ideas of female entrepreneurialism: often simultaneously recognising

social suffering whilst intensifying the entrepreneurial imperative alongside discourses of 'resilience' (Curran-Troop, Gill and Littler 2022; Curran-Troop 2023).

Backlash

However, over the past few years there has been a backlash against the way entrepreneurialism has been positioned as a 'social cure'. Today, the entrepreneur, including the female entrepreneur, has started to be more widely positioned and acknowledged as a social *problem*. For instance, 'the girlboss' started to become recognised as indicative of a precarious hustle culture that simply isn't delivering (see for eg Mukhopadhyay 2021). Critiques of neoliberal feminism, like neoliberal meritocracy – of working until you drop, of social mobility being far easier for those with more cushions of privilege – have become intensified as the gap between rich and poor expands.

One key example here is how the reality TV star Molly-Mae, the entrepreneur and creative director of fast fashion company *Pretty Little Thing*, said during a 2022 interview that anyone can get rich if only they try. For as she notoriously put it, 'we all have same 24 hours in a day'. There was a huge social media backlash, including from her employees, pointing out that the playing field for entrepreneurs is not level (*The Independent* 2022).

Another flamboyant example of the girlboss's fall from discursive grace is that of Elizabeth Holmes. The wealthy nineteen-year old founder of the Silicon Valley blood-testing start-up Theranos, founded on false claims, pumped full of venture capitalist money and valued in 2014 at \$10 billion dollars, spectacularly collapsed after the company's claims to do extensive blood testing with only a drop of blood were exposed as fraudulent. Holmes has since been imprisoned alongside her collaborator, Theranos's former president Sunny Balwani. As Emilie Grybos points out, both her media positioning as 'exceptional' and the scrum around her fall exemplify Silicon Valley's problems with gender (Grybos 2023).

The eight-part TV series *The Dropout*, released in 2022, dramatizes the scandal and is explicitly critical of the inflated entrepreneurial culture of compulsory boasting and bragging that Holmes was part of. The sixth episode 'Iron Sisters', scripted by Wei-Ning Yu, is a particularly sharp, nuanced episode which picks apart how Holmes used neoliberal feminism to try to work for her. The episode depicts the production of an advert for Theranos in which 'Elizabeth Holmes' appears in the advert telling the camera that 'next to every glass ceiling there's an iron lady'. *The Dropout's* critique is focalised through Theranos's Asian-American whistleblowing employee, Erika Cheung, who together with an older white female scientist, Dr Phyllis Gardner, present a very different intersectional feminist perspective. The episode pulls off the impressive synthesis of pointing out the difficulties for women in Silicon Valley and how they will be exacerbated by the Theranos scandal, whilst also critiquing the inequalities of corporate entrepreneurialism.

In many ways, then, we might say that the veneration of the neoliberal feminist entrepreneur has peaked and is now quite frequently critiqued (unsurprisingly, somewhat more than her male counterpart). Interestingly, this is happening at the same time as a mainstreaming of stories of women's strikes against corporate abuse: *Enola Holmes 2*, for example, includes a dramatization of the real-life strike in London in the nineteenth century, led by girls and women at a match factory, Bryant and May, against its poverty wages and working conditions that made matchgirls sick with 'phossy jaw' (Littler 2022). In other words the critique of neoliberal entrepreneurial feminism co-exists with an expansion of left feminist discourse in popular culture. For even whilst

it can be so fractious and divided – there are many ‘feminist faultlines’ – over the past decade, left feminism has become reinvigorated. As we can see in a number of formations: in for example, the grassroots actions against violence against women and financialised debt, as in #niunamenos; or gendered effects of austerity politics on domestic violence services, as with Sisters Uncut; in the renewed anger at gendered pay gaps and ballooning costs of childcare; in the surge of women becoming involved in strikes and the trade union movement; and in the wave of popular feminists entering municipal and parliamentary politics like Ada Colau in Barcelona and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US Congress.

Such tendencies and events are all part of a backlash against the savage effects of the enormous transfer of wealth to the superrich, which has happened over the past few decades, and has deepened gender inequalities at the intersections of class, ethnicity and disability. I have written about this in my book *Left Feminisms* (2023) which collects together a series of interviews with feminist academics on different parts of the left, from different generations, who are all involved with political, creative or activist projects outside as well as inside universities. I use the term ‘left feminisms’ because, at a time when we have a surge in right-wing populisms, increasing xenophobia, soaring power of hedge funds and attempts to roll back of feminist gains, including reproductive & LGBTQ+ rights, it is necessary to unite across our differences if we are to move, as the title of one well-known book put it back in the late 1970s, ‘beyond the fragments’ (Rowbotham et al 1979).

What role does entrepreneurialism play in a left feminist project? Is there a ‘left feminist entrepreneurialism’ that should be encouraged, or nurtured? We might disaggregate the different facets of entrepreneurialism and extract the useful aspects for more democratic egalitarian purposes. For instance, the energy, the creativity of putting together new solutions for social problems is very important, as is teamwork, and working together to devise participatory solutions that benefit our lives.

In their book *Assembly* (2017) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest that we should reclaim the word and the practice of ‘entrepreneur’ from the neoliberal right, in order to signal an ‘entrepreneurialism of the commons’. They discuss how the ‘self-management of the multitude’ – such as the Black Panther’s community breakfast clubs, or the Boston Womens’ Collective of the 1970s – can be thought of as ‘allow[ing] new subjectivities to take the floor’. This is similar to many of the collaborative projects and practices, past and present, that we identified and drew on in *The Care Manifesto* as inspiration for anti-racist, queer feminist eco socialist futures, as a means of enabling caring communities and caring economies, with examples ranging from free music festivals and community radio of GLC to the co-operatives of Mondragon and Jackson (Care Collective 2020).

On the other hand, I sound a note of caution. Whilst Hardt and Negri start with Schumpeter, stressing that he is closer to Marx than we think, there is also a longer history to the figure of the entrepreneur which is, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, tied to colonial practices of exploitation and financial profit-seeking. More recently, and as Hardt and Negri also acknowledge, since the 1970s there has been a profound tendency for social enterprise to have a dangerously ambiguous politics to it. It can involve not-for-profit initiatives for the public good, such as leisure centres. But it can also be used as a term to describe public-private partnerships that take vast quantities of money from the public sector and give it to the private sector, inflating corporate wealth and billionaire salaries. In the UK this happened through private finance initiative (PFI) schemes – subject of huge scandals because of the amount of money for public health paid to

private companies. It also relates to what Marianna Mazzacuto and Rosie Collington outline in their recent book *The Big Con* – how the private consultancy industry has taken huge sums of money from the public sector, draining collective resources and preventing them being ‘learning institutions’ (Mazzacuto and Collington 2023).

It is also a logic which Akwugo Emejulu describes as happening to NGOs and third sector charities. In the 1980s we saw ‘the astonishing resurrection of liberal free-market ideas that everyone had assumed were in the dustbin of history forever’, as Nancy Fraser describes it. The strengthening of capitalism involved its rehabilitation by ‘left’ political parties and across the public and third sector. As Emejulu identifies, the idea that ‘somehow capitalism could be harnessed in such a way that it could be turned on its head, in a kind of jujitsu move, and then “save” the communities it immiserated, was patently ridiculous’. It involved ‘a fundamental defeat of the left’, which included the project of left feminism (Emejulu 2023:40-55).

So if the idea of ‘the entrepreneurialism of the multitude’ can be useful up to a point, what characterizes that point is that we do need to be explicit about what we mean by it, particularly at a time when the gap between rich and poor continues to extend, enabled so dramatically by asset management companies. We need in other words to attend to political economy. We need to distinguish between the large corporate entrepreneur backed by venture capital and the small local business without romanticizing the latter. We need to emphasise and support co-operatives – to rediscover our deep co-operative histories and the purpose they have in the present. We need to stop the privatization and asset stripping of communal resources and public sectors and instead rebuild our common wealth and social infrastructure. And to continue to revitalize a left feminist ecosystem which can develop such alternatives without being co-opted.

To conclude, in summary, in business and management books and social texts, the entrepreneur is overwhelmingly figured as male - as ‘Entrepreneurial man’. Yet over the past few decades the symbolic locus of entrepreneurialism in popular culture has increasingly gravitated towards women. I’ve been outlining the dramatic formation of female entrepreneurialism from the 1980s, which has been fed simultaneously by gender mainstreaming and neoliberal feminism. We can trace a mediatized evolution of female entrepreneurialism from the shoulder-padded heroines of women’s magazines and films of the 1980s through to Instagram entrepreneurs of the present. But one strand of a new generation of left feminists are increasingly rejecting the political and social logic of neoliberal entrepreneurialism; both for its costs, and because of the patent inadequacies and failure of entrepreneurialism as a means of emancipation and a means to address patriarchy and gender inequality. Whilst it is by no means dominant, it nonetheless offers one glimmer – one necessary resource – of hope.

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