2 Market feminism: the case for a paradigm shift

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INTRODUCTION

The most salient aspect of this moment in human history is the globalisation of the market economy. Because human economic interaction inevitably involves an exchange of technology, culture and politics, as well as goods, the moment might be propitious for the globalisation of feminism, too. The feminist movements that have typified political life in the post-industrial Western nations during the twentieth century have left women with unprecedented power to influence world events. The potential for females in relatively advantaged positions to assist those who remain under truly crippling forms of patriarchy is more palpable than it has ever been. Certainly the need is great: the new world information systems horrify us with stories of honour killings, genital mutilations and other brutalities visited upon women in the developing nations. In the wake of the break-up of the former Soviet Union, women from the former Eastern bloc countries are dislocated, disempowered and, too often, forced into prostitution.

In contrast, the achievements of feminism in Western Europe and North America – in government and academia, but particularly in the private sector – have been impressive. Over the past twenty-five years, the number of women holding responsible positions in business, especially in market-related areas, has mushroomed. Finding a woman at the helm of a major corporation is still newsworthy, but happens more frequently. Though women still get neither the pay nor the prestige that men do, the progress made in a single generation has been dramatic. Women in the private sector of the global economy are now positioned to effect change in important ways.

The tragedy is that, for many, feminist thought remains chained to an anti-market prejudice. Numerous writers have asserted the fundamental incompatibility between market economics and feminism. Yet, as surveys of global feminism clearly demonstrate, the movement has had a wider, more lasting impact in those very societies where capitalism and consumer culture are most fully developed (Chafetz and Dworkin 1986). In truth, between the abysmal conditions for women in the developing nations and emerging accounts of women under the Soviets, it is less clear than ever that capitalism and the market offer the worst
socio-economic conditions for the advancement of feminism. This obvious contradiction between theory and data should cause questions to be raised, but so far it has not. In the present political environment, therefore, using momentum provided by the market to spread the acceptance of feminist values remains unthinkable.

Indeed, the prejudice against the marketplace in contemporary feminist thought, rather than empowering feminists in the private sector, thrusts upon them a dilemma. How is one to act as a feminist while working for an ad agency? Or while managing a line of toys? Today’s feminism is so unbendingly negative in its approach to market activity that steps taken to present positive imagery in ads or make progressive toys for girls are sweepingly dismissed: women who try to act on their feminism through marketing activities are often seen as merely co-opting feminism for private profit. While such an attitude may give abstract comfort to academics, it does legions of working women a disservice — and shuts off an avenue for the advancement of feminism already shown to be broadly effective. We are thus ill-equipped to rise to the opportunity before us.

The purpose of this chapter is to help create an intellectual environment where the unthinkable may be considered and the unspeakable may be articulated: Can the market be used to advance feminism? And, if so, how? I will approach the issue with a two-pronged argument. First, I will raise questions about whether feminism itself is (or has ever been) ‘outside the market’ by unmasking the ways that leading feminists have advanced their cause as well as their own financial interests through the shrewd use of marketing. By doing this, I hope to inspire a little healthy scepticism in my readers and to give them some ammunition for future essays and policy discussions. My second tactic will be to show how women in the private sector historically have expressed their feminism through market activities. By this, I hope to open others up to attitudes and strategies more in keeping with the trajectory of global politics (and the empirical record of global feminism). After identifying the contradictions inherent in the anti-market stance I will suggest how a paradigm shift in feminist outlook — toward what we could call ‘market feminism’ — might be realised.

What is offered in this chapter can only be a sketch, given the limits of space. It’s a suggestive outline, however, and one that I hope will be provocative enough to spur on others to investigate further. One of the most noticeable shortcomings is that I will only be retracing American feminist history here, rather than British or French or, certainly, global feminism. My excuses are both personal and strategic. I write about American feminism because that is my area of expertise. Nevertheless, I think the United States is a good place to begin for two reasons: (1) the movement in America is often noted as the most visible, radical and widespread among historical efforts to advance the cause of women and (2) American culture is often pinpointed as ‘ground zero’ of capitalism, marketing and consumer culture. To begin in the place that is home to both the most virulent capitalism and the most virulent feminism seems somehow appropriate.

CONTRADICTIONS IN ANTI-MARKET FEMINISM

The women who first organised on behalf of American women’s rights were atypical. Though the women of nineteenth-century America were culturally diverse and predominantly working folk, the early feminists were uniformly of British descent, Puritan-Quaker religion and leisure-class status (Hersh 1978). Their attitude to commerce was coloured, predictably, by both the ideology of their tradition and the challenges of their historical situation.

The tradition of the ‘founding feminists’ held that only common folk participated in commerce, while aristocrats like themselves remained above it. Working people produced what they could from their own labours, but most had to trade with others in order to survive. Aristocrats, in contrast, were usually large landowners whose tenants and capital were supposed to supply them with all they needed. In reality, of course, the ruling class participated in the market through the rents they collected from tenants, the interest they made on capital, and the trades they made for luxuries even they could not produce themselves. Though the gentry’s claim to a position ‘outside the market’ was an ideological fiction, their assertion of commercial neutrality was used to support their further claim to superior morality, which in turn justified their domination of both government and cultural life (Wood 1992).

The American Revolution destroyed the infrastructure of this social hierarchy by removing its anchor point, the British monarchy. Thus, the ancestral aristocracy abruptly and unexpectedly lost their hegemony over American life at the end of the eighteenth century. Until well into the 1800s, however, the former ruling class struggled to regain control while the common folk – made bold by democratic rhetoric and independent by the burgeoning modern economy – challenged the aristocrats’ ‘inborn’ right to rule. By the mid-nineteenth century, when the first feminist meetings were being held, the country was being further challenged by a staggering influx of immigrants, who came to seek their freedom and fortune in the new market democracy. Over the next seventy years, immigrants continued to arrive in undiminished numbers from all parts of Europe. The new arrivals represented a further challenge to the old order because they were predominantly Catholic or Jewish and thus unimpressed by the moral authority of the Protestant hierarchy that had ruled for the previous 200 years. Thus, as the market system picked up more steam, the old colonial elite became increasingly vituperative in their charges against the ‘immorality’ of commerce.

The founding feminists were personally, demographically and politically aligned with the conservative Protestants who resisted the new order. They were, therefore, also heavily involved in Whiggish efforts to regain control through ‘reform’ movements focused on the recreation, consumption, reading material, child-rearing practices and market behaviour of working-class people and immigrants. The anti-commercial origin of American feminism, therefore, predates the current fashionableness of Marxism by at least 100 years, and is rooted in sectarian, ruling-class interests, not redistributive radicalism.
Just as their fathers and grandfathers had consistently overlooked their own commercial activities when they asserted their moral superiority, so did the early Puritan feminists. The ‘female reform societies’ not only raised money through bazaars; they took shrewd advantage of a new economic form, the corporation (Ginzberg 1990). By incorporating, these women could shed the liabilities of the individual, including the many legal disadvantages of female gender, allowing them to collect and manage large sums of money in a way that would have been impossible for an individual female. Today, of course, American feminist organisations are also corporations – who now further benefit from later legislation allowing ‘non-profit’ corporations to avoid taxes. Consequently, the corporate form so hated by feminist theorists has actually been a key facilitating factor in the organisation and perpetuation of the movement.

The earliest media vehicles of the industrial age were religious newspapers, many of which were dedicated to covering the reform movements that the feminists and their men were initiating. The first feminist publication, *The Lily*, began as a temperance newspaper. Published by Amelia Bloomer, *The Lily* included contributions from leading feminists, especially Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The paper had a tiny circulation, limited to the Puritan reform community, until Ms Bloomer printed a picture of a new ‘dress reform’ – a pair of full trousers worn under a short skirt. This outfit, which quickly became known as ‘bloomers’, became a fashion fad that spread throughout the United States and even to Europe (Hersh 1978; Gattey 1967; Griffith 1984).

Feminist histories seldom acknowledge the popularity of the bloomer, but the resulting success of *The Lily* and its publisher leave no doubt as to the positive financial outcome of this sartorial innovation. The publisher promoted the bloomers by printing patterns for making them, daguerreotypes of herself and Stanton wearing them, and articles suggesting design and accessories. The circulation of *The Lily* skyrocketed as the fad spread: during the first year, subscriptions grew from 500 to 4,000 and the paper went from a monthly to a twice-monthly schedule. When Bloomer sold *The Lily* three years later, it had a national circulation of 6,000, which would have brought an attractive annuity of $5,000. During the same period, Bloomer was invited to give speeches at a number of prestigious venues. Appearing at the Metropolitan Hall in New York, for instance, she drew a standing-room-only crowd of 3,000, which produced a tidy sum in ticket sales. Soon, Bloomer could command fees for her speeches that were equal to the most respected male lecturers of the day. The *New York Journal* wrote:

> If ever a lady waked up one morning and found herself famous, that woman was Mrs. Bloomer; she has immortalised her name, and the Bloomer Costume will become as celebrated as Mary Queen of Scots’ Cap, the Elizabeth Ruff, or the Pompadour Robe.

*(Gattey 1967: 82)*

We could, therefore, say that Amelia Bloomer’s good fortune derived not only from her feminism but from clear-cut promotional activities, including the
fetishising of a pair of trousers and the commoditisation of her own speaking skills. There seems little here that is ‘outside the market’.

Lecturing was a recognised ‘get rich quick’ activity in the nineteenth century. So, although feminist leaders of that period certainly took social risks by speaking for women’s rights, they also reaped financial benefits. Lucy Stone, a prominent abolitionist and feminist, worked the popular lecture circuit in both the US and Canada. Though an impassioned activist, she delighted audiences everywhere, drawing huge crowds. In the mid-1850s, she attracted the largest audiences ever assembled in both St Louis and Toronto. Some said she even outdrew Jenny Lind, the Swedish opera singer famously promoted by P. T. Barnum. All this success translated into dollars, of course. Over the first three years of her career as a speaker, Stone managed to save $7,000 – an enormous sum at that time. Indeed, the press used her financial success as a point of criticism: she was accused of taking money from rural innocents and even charged with selling discounted ‘season tickets’. By the time of her Southern tour in 1854, Stone was netting between $500 and $1,000 a week. She retired from lecturing when she gave birth, but was forced to return because of her husband’s poor money management. Though all her savings had been wiped out, she quickly recovered that money and then some. Stone was quite wealthy when she died – yet she had no means of support other than what she earned as a speaker and as publisher of her own feminist vehicle, the Woman’s Journal (Gatley 1967; Kerr 1992).

Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not take advantage of the money-earning opportunities offered by the movement until her children were grown up. She was engaged by the New York Lyceum Bureau in 1869 and she earned $2,000 in her first seven months. She continued to lecture for twelve years – eight months out of every year – earning $3,000 to $4,000 per annum. In the crucial women’s convention year of 1871, in fact, Stanton did not want to forego income by interrupting her lecture tour, so she sent a $100 donation instead (Lutz 1940).

By the turn of the century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her close associate, Susan B. Anthony, were not only well known in the traditional public service sense but were also celebrities in the modern mass-market sense: Stanton even appeared in a national advertising campaign for Fairy Soap (Figure 2.1). Struggling for a reason to justify this transgression, feminist historian Mary Ryan writes: ‘The common-sense advertisements of the Fair [sic] Soap Company even resorted to feminism, picturing Elizabeth Cady Stanton extolling the virtue of their pure, simple cleansing product, unadulterated by perfume’ (1983: 155). It seems, however, that appealing to feminist sentiments was not a desperate measure at all. Fairy Soap was the leading brand at that time; the campaign seems to have been a straightforward celebrity appeal, and Stanton was only one among many marketable figures who were signed to hype the soap.

Feminism’s high-class origins had, furthermore, given it clear social cachet by 1900 – and the market authority that goes with status. The ideal of the movement, known then as ‘The New Woman’, appeared often in the popular press, usually wearing bloomers, smoking or riding a bicycle. The New Woman’s
upper-class credentials, university education and ‘progressive’ ideas made her quite chic. Though today’s critics like to claim that the New Woman was antithetical to capitalism, she did, in fact, appear in ads – then and later (Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Such contradictory evidence usually prompts the charge that industry ‘co-opted’
feminism for private profit. Let’s bear in mind the humbling information that feminism’s founders did the same.

Feminist leaders continued to benefit from the marketability of the movement during the Second Wave. Press coverage focused on fresh college graduates entering the movement in late 1969 and early 1970. Having been involved in leftist politics on campus, the ‘New Feminists’ brought an affinity with Marxism and insisted that women’s liberation be subject to the destruction of the whole socio-economic system (Cohen 1988). Yet the leaders of the New Feminism were, even then, benefiting financially from the interest that the media took in their movement.

In 1970 alone, the new wing of the feminist movement produced three books: Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics, Shulamith Firestone’s Dialectic of Sex and Robin Morgan’s Sisterhood is Powerful. These books were published not by radical underground presses but by Doubleday, William Morrow and Random House, respectively. Since none of these books had been started before 1969 and all of them were available for purchase in 1970, it seems smart editors at major houses recognised the commercial potential of the new movement immediately and jumped to sign contracts with its leaders. After that, though most media interest reflected the
Pond's used to appeal to ladies from the cigar and derby generation.

It still does.

newsworthiness of feminism, some of it was undoubtedly engineered by publicity agents representing radical feminists who had signed contracts with big publishers.

The first of these books, Kate Millett's Sexual Politics, debuted in 1970 and quickly found a place on the best-seller list, making its author, in her own words, 'shamefully, pointlessly rich' (Cohen 1988: 251). The book was positively reviewed,
Figure 2.4 Advertisement for panty hose
Source: Mademoiselle, August 1971, p. 172
particularly by *Time* magazine, who put Millett’s picture on the cover of their 31 August 1970 issue. During the next six months, Millett appeared on the *Dick Cavett Show* and *David Susskind*, as well as the *Today Show*. In February 1971, *Mademoiselle* ran a feature called ‘A Day in the Life of Kate Millett’. ‘Sexual Politics is one of those books that change irrevocably and forever one’s way of seeing things’, exulted the fashion magazine, ‘It casts a light so brilliant and penetrating that it illuminates not just a single corner but a whole landscape. Everything is different’ (p. 138).

That year, *Mademoiselle* chose four books that were ‘must-reads for the times’. *Sexual Politics* was one of them. But it was Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood is Powerful* that, arriving in time for the Christmas rush, won the place on *Mademoiselle*’s ‘plan to give/hope to get’ list. Ironically, when this collection of radical feminist chapters with the woman sign on the cover appeared, the same symbol had already been ‘co-opted’ for a panty hose package (Figure 2.4). Both were popular commodities. Not to be outdone, other leading publishers brought out still more feminist books. Basic Books published Vivian Gornick’s *Woman in Sexist Society* in 1971, which was followed in the same year by Karen DeCrowe’s *The Young Woman’s Guide to Liberation* and Lucy Komisar’s *The New Feminism*. It appears that feminist books, no matter how radical, were good business.

Germaine Greer’s 1971 American tour was a full-blown marketing event in the tradition of P. T. Barnum. The fanfare opened with a cover of *Life* magazine touting the ‘Saucy feminist even men like’. One of Greer’s first appearances was a debate moderated by Norman Mailer and attended by the most well connected of New York’s avant-garde. Tickets on the main floor went for twice what popular Broadway shows were charging and, even so, were in short supply. The whole evening was captured by a British film crew for a documentary to be called ‘Germaine Greer versus the United States’. The American media, as well as her documentary crew, proceeded to follow Greer around the US as she stump for feminism and dined rather publicly with an assortment of attractive men (Cohen 1988). Needless to say, Greer’s book, *The Female Eunuch*, became a best seller.

Speech-making for feminism was still lucrative during the Second Wave. Like the founding feminists, speakers such as Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer and Betty Friedan were highly sought after, particularly on college campuses. The ‘take’ for these events must have been enormous, because the speakers themselves often reaped higher incomes from speaking than from their regular work. For instance, Steinem already made an above-average income writing for magazines like *Esquire*, *New York* and *Vogue*. On the feminist lecture circuit, she earned double that amount (Cohen 1988). (To her credit, Steinem returned her speaking fees in donations to the movement. Others similarly remunerated were not so generous.)

The most long-lasting commercial endeavour of the Second Wave is now touted by academics as the most commerce-free. Clay Felker, Gloria Steinem’s former editor at *Esquire* and *New York*, came up with the idea for ‘a slick, commercial magazine’ devoted to the feminist movement (Cohen 1988: 324). Felker chose Gloria for the editorship largely because he thought her fame as a feminist and a
member of the ‘Beautiful People’ would bring publicity. After a prototype inserted in *New York* sold out in eight days and 35,000 women mailed in requests for subscriptions, Warner Communications put up $1 million dollars to publish *Ms.* magazine on a monthly basis. Betty Friedan promptly accused Gloria Steinem of ‘ripping off the movement for private profit’ (ibid.: 336). Yet Friedan had once quit her publisher because he wasn’t prepared to market *The Feminine Mystique* aggressively enough: ‘I remember him pleading with me . . . and I remember looking him right in the eye and saying, “George, you made me feel Jewish for trying to sell that book. Go fuck yourself’” (ibid.: 96). Today, of course, Friedan’s classic has been reprinted many times and in multiple languages, providing no doubt plenty of ‘private profit’.

A few New Feminists ended up with successful careers in the media. More went back to the university where they began to write feminist theory, criticism and history. Over the next two decades, university professors researching their topics with a feminist perspective produced a remarkable body of work, contributing vastly to our knowledge of women in several fields, including history, literature, anthropology, sociology and psychology. With the power of print behind them and the captives of the classroom beneath them, however, academics could focus the feminist agenda with a perspective uniquely their own and even begin to assert the right to define feminism. Because this cadre of academic feminists was still loyal to Marx, a prominent characteristic of post-Second Wave feminist writing is its persistent attack upon the market economy, particularly the corporations behind it.

During the same timeframe, the female employees of those same corporations have gone from representing only 3 per cent of corporate management jobs to 40 per cent (Towery 1998). Many marketing specialities, like public relations, have become female-dominated (58.6 per cent of public relations professionals are women) (Cline and Toth 1993). In advertising, the area of the economy which draws the most feminist fire, more than half of all managers (57 per cent) are now women (Hernandez 1997). The effects of this ‘feminisation’ in the marketplace are visible in Nike campaigns and Barbie themes, but feminist academics have either ignored or discounted the efforts of working women to bring a feminist perspective to bear on the objects and messages that the market actually produces. Instead, anti-market feminist literature has generalised on a ‘theoretical level’ until nothing produced by capitalist consumer culture can be considered feminist. Various other rhetorical strategies have also negated the efforts of women in corporations. For instance, feminist authors belittle the clothes and taste of female corporate leaders, calling them ‘homeovestites’ if they aren’t masculine (see Lord 1994 on Jill Barad). Or, they equate market activity with maleness, implying that women in corporations are ‘really men’ (Ehrenreich 1990). Or, they dismiss the very real power of some women in the private sector — arguing that corporations are still, after all, dominated by men (as if universities were not dominated by men) (Duffy 1994).

To my mind, the most problematic aspect of the whole situation is that feminist writers consistently condemn others for ‘commoditising’ or ‘co-opting’ feminism
in order to make a profit, as if they themselves are not doing the same thing. Yet feminist books continue to be published by major publishers, and the authors are commoditised in lecture tours and talk shows. For example, in spite of her charges that the publishing industry stokes the fires of anti-feminism Susan Faludi's *Backlash* was a runaway success. Her frequent appearances on television and in magazines were not, I'm sure, entirely attributable to her good credentials as a feminist, but had some little to do with the efforts of her publisher, Doubleday. Similarly, *The Beauty Myth*, also a best seller, quickly propelled its pretty author, Naomi Wolf, to celebrity status, from which she could display herself in classic Hollywood glamour style in the pages of *Esquire*. Wolf, five years later, has already published her third book, which suggests that her publishers, both Doubleday and Random House, are making some money.

Jean Kilbourne's (1979) advertising critique, *Killing Us Softly*, was casually reissued in almost identical form as 1987's *Still Killing Us Softly*. Now *Killing Us Softly 3* is upon us like a movie sequel. These videotapes can be purchased for $299 or rented from Cambridge Documentary Films for $46 a day plus shipping and credit charges. If you rent the tapes, they arrive plastered with stickers warning that they are both copy-protected and copyrighted. It would seem that a profit motive is at work: if all Kilbourne wanted was to further 'the cause', there would be no need to guard property rights so jealously. Indeed, one might think that it would be in the interests of the movement if these tapes were copied and circulated as freely and widely as possible. But in spite of the profit motive that is clear from the moment you open the box, a major point of Kilbourne's argument is that corporations who do include a feminist message in their ads are 'co-opting' the movement for private gain.

bell hooks also offers a videotape on the commoditisation of women and blacks in commercial culture. Her own direct mail piece, however, rather effectively commoditises feminism, critical studies and even hooks herself (Figure 2.5). The distribution company is a 'non-profit organisation', to be sure, but that term merely describes a particular tax status with special post office privileges – and in no way means that hooks is not profiting from the sale of this tape.

The price tags on Kilbourne and hooks’ videos would seem to put them out of reach for most women. That’s because the real market for these expensive tapes is not individual consumers, but university libraries – hardly an ‘alternative’ market. The fantastic popularity of women’s studies programmes virtually guarantees an audience for these tapes, as well as a market for feminist books and lecture tickets. Since women’s studies was first established in the mid-1970s, more than 670 undergraduate and 111 graduate programmes have been established at 250 colleges nation-wide (Worthington 1997). Feminists have been 'big box office' on college campuses for thirty years now, producing robust income for the speakers and, sometimes, the university groups who engage them.

The idea that any of this activity is taking place 'outside the market' is a naïve delusion. Yet most of these feminists are making money off women – by complaining about other people making money off women. Then they expect us not to notice the paradox.
Figure 2.5 bell hooks' direct mail piece
Source: Media Education Foundation, www.mediaed.org
MARKET FEMINISM

In contrast to the prevailing view, I would argue that industrialisation and the market system are what made the success of American feminism possible. There are several reasons why this is true. One of them, as we have seen, is that the market-driven media (including newspapers, books, television, lecture circuits and magazines) has provided an efficient conduit for feminist ideas since the first days of the movement. Of at least equal importance, however, was the creation of a large class of educated, motivated women with the leisure time to devote to politics. As nearly every history of the modern economy shows, one of the most important effects of industrialisation was the creation of a large middle class. In America, the women of this class chose to stay home in order to emulate the prevailing ideas of gentility. Not satisfied with merely staying home, and freed by the labour-saving devices of consumer culture to devote themselves to other activities, middle-class housewives were the foot-soldiers of the First Wave. These women picketed, canvassed, circulated petitions, organised groups, initiated referenda, and, in short, provided the woman-power for suffrage as well as other women’s issues. Histories of American feminism are unequivocal about the importance of these volunteers. Thus, to a significant degree, American feminism rests upon the political possibilities created by the material abundance of industrialisation.

American feminism also rests upon the opportunities for work the modern economy created for another large group. Though the traditional wisdom insists that the modern economy required women stay in the ‘domestic sphere’ (Cott 1977), the actual statistics point in a different direction. Since the first factory in America opened in 1814, women have been employed by industry in significant numbers – and not only as factory operatives, but as designers, marketers, writers, advertising agents, illustrators, print-makers and craftsmen. The percentage of women in the American labour force has grown steadily over the last hundred years (Figure 2.6). Certainly there is no question that some areas of the economy were closed to women. And, women, like men, were often employed in unsafe and underpaid jobs. Nevertheless, it is also unquestionably true that the modern economy has offered women a level of economic autonomy undreamed of in pre-industrial American culture.

The modern economy has also produced many new cultural forms. Here, too, women have benefited. Even the women’s magazines so reviled in feminist writing have been havens for women’s employment and staunch supporters of women’s advancement. Though the feminist literature has repeatedly asserted that the women’s magazines are merely the prostitutes of corporate capitalism, the most recent histories are now debunking that myth. In books like Jennifer Scanlon’s history of the Ladies’ Home Journal (1995), we find that the predominantly female writers, editors and advertising agents behind the early women’s magazines were sympathetic to the movement (and were sometimes activists). They carried the feminist spirit into their hiring practices and market strategies, and into the pages they produced. Scanlon shows, for instance, that both the biggest women’s
magazine in the early century, the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and the biggest advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, were led by women with developed feminist consciousness. These women, Louisa Knapp Curtis and Helen Lansdowne Resor, surrounded themselves with other feminists as colleagues and contributors, thus advancing the cause of feminism in the private sector. Their readers, including their advertisers, seem to have responded positively. As I have demonstrated in my forthcoming book, *Fresh Lipstick*, the women’s magazines that supported feminism during the suffrage years experienced an increase in subscriptions as well as advertising revenues, while those which opposed women’s rights declined and even closed. Furthermore, by putting their activism to work in the mainstream press, women in the media have spread the word about feminism to a far larger audience than was possible through sectarian or scholarly publications.

After discovering the support provided by women like Curtis and Resor, it is unsettling to find that the First Wave was marked by the same schism between ‘scholastics’ and secular women that concerns us here. The academics of the early twentieth century were not inclined to acknowledge or document the support they received from women in the private sector – and their counterparts later in the century have been disinclined to redress the balance in their histories.

Take, for instance, Miriam Leslie. Once a dancer in New Orleans who called herself ‘Minnie Montez’, she led what some would delicately call ‘a colourful life’. But in 1865, Miriam became editor of a magazine in Frank Leslie’s enormous publishing empire. She and Leslie became lovers, and their affair was a national scandal. After marrying her boss, Mrs Leslie was one of the industrial *nouveau riche*
the aristocratic feminists so thoroughly despised. Frank Leslie, however, eventually ran into financial difficulties and died in bankruptcy. Upon his death, Miriam took over the business and assumed all his debts. Under her close direction, the publishing company was brought back to its former power. When Miriam died in 1914, she left her entire estate to the women’s suffrage movement and named its leader, Carrie Chapman Catt, as trustee. This generous bequest was a major factor in putting the movement ‘over the top’, paying for educational and promotional materials that went out around the country in support of suffrage. The money also figured quite prominently in the consolidation of Ms Catt’s power in the movement (Fowler 1986). Yet most histories of the suffrage movement never mention Mrs Leslie or her generous gift.

Jane Cunningham Croly was the most famous newspaperwoman in nineteenth-century America. She was the first woman to work daily for a newspaper and she was the first to teach journalism at the college level. She was the originator of the women’s page and the syndicated column. Though this is all well-known in media history, Croly’s equally important contribution to the women’s movement is known only to those who read the footnotes of feminist histories.

Croly founded the first non-sectarian organisation devoted exclusively to advancing the interests of women. Called ‘Sorosis’, this club’s members were very different from the Puritan feminists (Croly 1898). Most worked for pay: doctors, journalists, designers, editors, illustrators and poets. They were not necessarily Anglo-Saxon Protestant or born in America. They were more pragmatic than ideological in orientation – what critics today call ‘atheoretical’. Within a year of its founding, Sorosis had grown to 83 members, almost entirely professionals. Soon, however, the membership expanded to include middle-class women who wanted to invest their energies outside the home. Like brushfire, the women’s club idea spread to other towns. In 1880, Jane Croly took the first step toward forming the General Federation of Women’s Clubs by calling a national conference. Non-partisan and non-denominational, the GFWC started with 52 member organisations. Within a dozen years, the Federation had 180 clubs and 20,000 members. By the turn of the century, it had 130,000 members. There were one million women in the GFWC by 1910 and two million by 1915. Thus, it was Jane Croly who started the biggest organisational movement for women in American history (O’Neill 1969). Ultimately, it was through the GFWC that the suffrage movement got most of its money, workers, publicity and influence.

In a very concrete sense, the feminist organisations of today, like the National Organisation for Women, are the descendents of Sorosis. Historians should have been studying the history of Sorosis with the same respect and intensity with which they have pored over the early reform groups. But they have not. One reason for this, I believe, is that the lives of these women do not fit the ideology of feminism as it has developed. These women were neither Puritans, academics nor ideologues. Perhaps most incriminating, they were intimately involved in the burgeoning commercial and consumer culture.

One of the most successful feminist organisations that emerged within the framework of the GFWC was the National Consumers’ League. The League was
founded on the concept that the biggest political weapon middle-class women had was their spending power. Using boycotts, lobbying and other governmental pressure, including the drafting of protective legislation, the NCL became, in feminist historian Eleanor Flexner's words, the 'militant and highly articulate conscience of the buying public' (1975: 213–14). Florence Kelly, leader of the NCL during its heyday, was a Marxist. Though she retained her belief in the long-range goals of socialism, she directed her activities in the NCL to putting an end to abuses as she found them. Her choice draws criticism today. As feminist historian William O'Neill remarks:

She needed immediate results, and they were to be gotten only through bourgeois reformist organisations like the NCL . . . This response, so typical of American radicals, might well be called the pragmatic fallacy, because by concentrating on reform at the expense of revolution one ended up with neither. Nonetheless, Mrs. Kelley's decision did her credit. It requires a certain hardness of character to put abstract propositions, like The Revolution, ahead of human wants, and to work for a distant event when present evils are so compelling.

(O'Neill 1969: 136–7)

Here we have another paradox produced by the Marxist loyalties of recent feminist writers. In spite of the long and admirable record of American feminism in putting pressure upon both business and government, today's feminists belittle 'liberal' reform efforts as a matter of principle. In their view, it is preferable to do nothing toward alleviating human suffering, in order that 'The Revolution' may come about sooner. In this way of thinking, virtually none of the major feminist initiatives — suffrage, the Equal Rights Amendment, the pro-choice movement, the anti-pornography movement, the push for equal education rights, the work toward divorce reform, the assertion of property rights, and so on — can be held to be anything but weak liberal backsliding. Furthermore, according to this viewpoint, the huge numbers of professional women who were in the American work-force by 1970 may as well have stayed at the office, conducting business as usual, instead of coming out as they did for the re-emergent feminist movement.

Just as middle-class housewives formed the backbone of the First Wave, the strength of the Second Wave came from growth in the number of educated working women joining the movement (Chafetz and Dworkin 1986). The National Organisation for Women, for instance, was founded by business and professional women. NOW's victories in extending anti-discrimination protection to women in the workplace, in establishing the right to equal pay for equal work and in knocking down gender classifications for employment notices were all achieved while NOW was still under the guidance of successful working women, rather than campus radicals. In those early days, public relations for NOW was professionally managed by nationally known PR people such as Mariel Fox. Media support was ensured by such members as Shana Alexander, Marlene Sanders
and Helen Gurley Brown (Cohen 1988). (Contrary to the prevailing myth, the women’s magazines generally supported the Second Wave, just as they did the First, particularly in their dramatic rally around the Equal Rights Amendment.)

As the critique of the marketplace first emerged from the campus radicals, NOW members in marketing, such as Rena Bartos, used the power of their professional positions to perform studies and make changes that would reflect the feminist agenda in messages, magazines and products (Figure 2.7).

The businesswomen of that early Second Wave generation proceeded in their careers – some of them reaching the summits of American corporations. Linda Wachner, for instance, was one of the earliest advertisers to support Ms. magazine. She is now head of Warnaco, the multinational that owns both Victoria’s Secret and Calvin Klein underwear. Other women now run some of the largest ad agencies on the face of the globe, like Charlotte Beers at Ogilvy & Mather, Jill Barad, who had a progressive impact on the design of Barbie as a marketing manager, is now head of Mattel.

Barbie. Victoria’s Secret. Ogilvy & Mather. Having women in the forefront of enterprises like these was a pipe dream when the Second Wave first burst on the scene. In those early days, the idea that women in such positions might make a difference in the design of toys, the comfort of clothes or the depiction of women was heady stuff. Yet now the day has arrived and no one seems to care what, if anything, these women do for feminism. Indeed, academic feminists appear to be intent upon discounting any progress that women in these positions are able to make – and will demean them personally for trying.

All the while, more American women are training for careers in business, especially marketing. Today, women represent 34 per cent of MBA enrollment. Women have long dominated college programmes in public relations (where they now outnumber men ten to one) and advertising (68 per cent of advertising majors in America are female) (Cline and Toth 1993; Lazier and Kendrick 1993). If these women should also show an interest in women’s studies while on campus, however, they must listen to diatribes against the market – and precious little, if anything, to guide them as feminists in their future careers. If they’re smart, they learn early to compartmentalise their feminism from their work, instead of learning to look for ways to implement feminism at work. And it’s a shame – because, as we have seen, the history of feminism is replete with examples of how the market was used to advance the cause: through the media, through products, through book publishing and lecturing, through employment practices or through advertisements. Much could be gained by having something productive to say to these young women before they go out into the global economy.

AND, IF SO, HOW?

Let’s return now to the original questions: Can the market be used to advance feminism? And, if so, how? It seems to me that a paradigm shift towards ‘market feminism’ could have an impact on theory, activism, research and education.
Figure 2.7 Shoe advertisement
Source: Glamour, February 1971, p. 68
The overriding consideration, perhaps, is theory, since that is where the problem is centred. The first step towards retheorising feminism’s relations with the marketplace is to acknowledge a single awful fact: women have been oppressed in every form of government or economy that is known to us. From a purely feminist (and not necessarily Marxist) perspective, there is simply no reason for the overwhelming emphasis on criticising capitalism. As Gayle Rubin wrote in her classic 1975 chapter:

> Women are oppressed in societies that can by no stretch of the imagination be described as capitalist. . . . Capitalism has taken over, and required, notions of male and female which predate it by centuries. No analysis of the reproduction of labour power under capitalism can explain foot-binding, chastity belts, or any of the incredible array of Byzantine, fetishized indignities, let alone the more ordinary ones, which have been inflicted upon women in various times and places.

(Rubin 1975: 163)

Capitalism is not the cause; it is merely the current circumstance. So, the second step, perhaps, is recognising yet another awful fact: it is sometimes necessary to act under imperfect conditions. By letting go of the expectation that right action can occur only in the context of total system destruction (‘The Revolution’), the ‘bourgeois reform efforts’ which have historically been feminism’s stock in trade can be reinstated and re dignified. If this small generosity could be extended to activism within the confines of a corporation, then a window could open somewhere for feminism in the workplace. Such a shift would necessarily require that feminist theorists allow the possibility of progress within a market- and profit-oriented framework. The fact that a change occurred within a business organisation or an advertising campaign could not, ipso facto, discredit the activism that led to it.

Academic authors might find for the first time that they could write about positive changes in the marketplace without the need to find some means – any means – to condemn them. Thus, corporate feminists might be recognised for their efforts on behalf of the movement. Having others who recognise and support their efforts ‘on the inside’, as it were, could only produce more positive motivation for women in the private sector. The cause of activism would be well served.

Feminist criticism would not need to lose its teeth by such a switch, however. Instead, a smarter, more worldly-wise approach to economics would vastly improve both the critical edge and the practical contribution of the literature. Though economists like Julie Nelson and Marianne Ferber (1993) have made important initial efforts to marry feminist politics and economic theory, most critics still approach economics with language theory – with disastrous results. As part of an overall effort to bring real economic theory into feminist thought, promiscuous use of terms like ‘co-opt’ and ‘commodities’ might be curbed in favour of
more acute analysis. Under the current intellectual fashion, words like ‘commoditise’ have come to be used so carelessly that they no longer mean anything at all.

The whole area of advertising criticism could benefit from more ‘market feminist’ knowledge and techniques. As Margaret Dully pointed out in her exhaustive review of feminist advertising studies, one of the biggest ongoing problems is the embarrassing lack of knowledge about how marketing and advertising are actually done (1994). Lazier and Kendrick (1993) further suggest there is a real need to improve our investigation of consumer response to commercial messages; but under today’s theoretical perspective it’s the critic’s view that counts, not the reader’s. After thirty years of polemics, more research into the actual response of feminism’s constituency – that is, ordinary non-academic women – is probably in order.

Changes in terminology, method and theory could result in a more inclusive perspective. Consider, for instance, that charging a woman with ‘co-opting’ feminist language or imagery because she used it in the course of private-sector work necessarily implies that feminist academics, who also use feminist language and imagery in the course of their work, are ‘outside the market’, and so cannot ‘co-opt’ feminism. This, as we have seen, is pure ideology. But the criticism further implies that feminism is not open to all women, only to those of a certain class. Such distinctions inevitably lead toward selective discussions of who is ‘inside’ and who is ‘outside’, a path that should be forbidden to a social movement that hopes to encompass the world.

It would be my hope that another outgrowth of the shift to ‘market feminism’ would be the retrieval of women like Jane Croly and Helen Resor from obscurity. Let’s find out more about the women who expressed feminism in the marketplace. Who were they? How did they envision their activities as political statements? What did they contribute to the organised movement? Learning more about these women may point up further directions for both research and activism. For instance, learning the history of the National Consumers’ League (and the many other consumer advocacy initiatives of the First Wave) made me wonder why and how feminism lost that approach. Bringing a focused consumer advocacy perspective back into feminism – instead of just bemoaning ‘consumers’ and ‘consumer culture’ in general terms – would surely improve conditions as these objects and habits spread around the world.

Last, but perhaps most important, I would hope to see a pedagogical perspective develop that could ground and guide the next generation of marketing managers. As it is, when you look through the literature for ways to teach feminism in a market context, you come up empty-handed. There is nothing there but condemnation. When confronting a classroom of female faces already committed to business training and marketing careers, just standing there dogmatically condemning the market economy seems inadequate, out of touch, intellectually lazy and even cowardly. Those are the times when the cost of this lost opportunity seems entirely too high.
Seizing this moment, therefore, could have historic results matching the dimensions of the global economy itself. Continuing to adhere, ostrich-like, to a viewpoint that lacks empirical validity, ignores the realities of the past and is so grossly out of touch with the present can only impede the movement’s progress into the future. Adopting a fresh perspective could instead help push feminism into a paradigm for the new millennium.

REFERENCES

Ehrenreich, B. (1990) ‘Sorry, sisters, this is not the revolution’, Time, Fall: 15.