

Having it all in one place: Feminism and capitalism in Ellen Bravo's 'Not a favor to women: The workplace in a feminist future'

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Abstract

Feminist utopianism, and feminism as utopian, can offer hope for social transformation and radical change in a climate which insists alternatives are either impossible or too risky to consider. Yet utopias, as cultural products of a particular milieu, also reflect the present. In this essay I use Ellen Bravo's short story, 'Not a favour to women: The workplace in a feminist future' (2015) as a point of departure from which to discuss feminist entanglements with patriarchy and capitalism – ideologies whose parameters carefully circumscribe discussions about social improvement and progress. I argue that in neglecting to explore a more radical alternative to notions of the workplace and capitalism, the text falls short of the radical and revolutionary utopian potential explored in earlier feminist utopian texts. I read this alongside mainstream liberal feminism's failing to reject dominant discourses of capitalism and neoliberalism. I argue that, while being radical and utopian are often portrayed as 'dangerous', the greater danger is not being daring enough to imagine alternatives to current damaging and oppressive social systems.

Keywords

Utopia, feminist utopianism, capitalism, workplace, hierarchy, reproductive futurity, neoliberalism

It is hard to be brave in dangerous times. With looming environmental crises, mental health crises, economic crises, and obesity crises, it seems we are confronted at every turn with more risks, threats, precarity, and instability. A continuous and normalised state of emergency, providing justificatory rhetoric for neoliberalism, posits individual responsibility and self-reliance as the only protection against a seemingly inevitable state of affairs. Yet to feminists, dangers faced are not individual but unequally distributed; not necessarily new, but grounded in deep-seated structural inequalities. Feminism is, in part, reliant on the hope that these inequalities are also not inevitable: that a different future is possible. This is a difficult point to make when, as Nina Power puts it, 'it has been impossible to imagine anything different; capitalism depends upon the reproduction of sameness in the guise of difference, the idea that there is no alternative, and no future (in the sense of new ways of living) is possible' (2009, p. 2). This system, apparently the very best that human effort can imagine and create, fails and endangers most people, the ecosystems on which we depend, and the future generations left to confront its mess (Fournier, 2002; Levitas, 2010). We find ourselves in the position where it is more dangerous *not* to imagine something different. The real danger is of looking elsewhere while our future gets written for us (Wagner-Lawlor, 2013). To this end, it is dangerous, I argue, for feminism to place its hope, as well as its future and current demands and action, in a compromise with patriarchy and capitalism.

In what follows, I use Ellen Bravo's short-story 'Not a favour to women: The workplace in a feminist future' (2015) as a point of departure from which to discuss feminist entanglements with patriarchy and capitalism. Bravo's short-story, which appeared in Brodsky and Nalebuff's

The feminist utopia project: Fifty-seven visions of a wildly better future, is not a critical feminist utopia. But it is a utopia, it is feminist, and it is critical of current society. However, it refrains from exploring a radical alternative to capitalism, and thus falls short of the radical and revolutionary potential explored in earlier feminist utopian texts, such as Ursula Le Guin's *The dispossessed* (1975) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the edge of time* (1976).¹

A rich tradition of feminist utopianism, in fiction, theory, and practice, has engaged in a project of radical imagining since the 1970s and 1980s (Moylan, 2014). These works are not just simplistic depictions of the 'good' and 'progressive' society, but are transgressive texts that challenge generic and discursive boundaries to allow the creation of a space in which new ways of relating to the world can be practiced (Sargisson, 2000; Pohl, 2006). They critique not only the society from which they emerge, but also the traditional presentation of utopia as a static, harmonious, rational, and complete end-state, replacing this with a utopianism which remains in process (Moylan, 2014; Wagner-Lawlor, 2013). This processual element is important, and feminist utopian theorists such as Erin McKenna refer to utopia as an 'ongoing task rather than a resting place' (2001, p. 3). The process of working through problems and of potential change is more important than attaining a state where no such problems exist and no further transformation is desired (Moylan, 2014). For example, in critical feminist utopias such as Le Guin's *The dispossessed* (1975) and Piercy's *Woman on the edge of time* (1976), the authors depict societies which are not perfectly harmonious but rather constituted by a process of continual negotiation, involving disagreement, conflict, environmental limitations, and unhappiness; yet the element of hope – the utopian impulse – is nonetheless retained (Moylan, 2014).

As reflections of the present, utopias may say more about *current* society than any potential, imagined world. But it matters greatly which elements of the present are taken for granted and which are viewed as appropriate subjects for criticism and re-invention. In dangerous times – a society of 'risk' – dreams and visions of future possibilities die or become survivalist (Bauman, 1992), narrowly circumscribing and predetermining future actions and possibilities. Feminism, arguably a utopian discourse which seeks transformation of culture and society (Sargisson, 1996, 2000; Silbergleid, 1997; Wagner-Lawlor, 2013), must struggle within this anti-utopian environment of fear and survivalism. The rise of the extreme right, cuts to gender studies programmes, and everyday violence against women all necessitate urgent feminist responses; as a result, though, more feminist time and energy is redirected towards countering immediate threat than to dreaming of fabulous alternatives. Stifled by a discourse of 'dangerous times' that seems so hostile to brave new utopian visions, radical imagination is seen as a pointless luxury rather than a 'political necessity' (Wagner-Lawlor, 2013).

This anti-utopianism occurs simultaneously with what Prügl refers to as the 'neoliberalising of feminism' (2015, p. 614) and its watering down through corporate and celebrity feminism (Keller & Ringrose, 2015). The 'girl power' feminism of the likes of Taylor Swift and Katy Perry seems to be a current requirement for female celebrities, while right-wing women such as Sarah Palin and Ivanka Trump declare themselves feminists (and Trump even asserts that her father, the US president, is some kind of 'champion of women's empowerment'; Grundy, 2018, n.p.). Yet these neoliberal and celebrity declarations of feminist credentials arguably dilute feminism's radical potential. Increasingly, feminism is appropriated and portrayed as mere 'social change', with sexism branded as 'an evil which can be eradicated by female participation *in the way things are*' (Kornegger, 2012, p. 32; italics added).

Bravo's utopia likewise suggests the complex complicity of mainstream feminism with the way things are – difficult entanglements of feminism with hetero-patriarchy and capitalism, which may be dangerous indeed for the people oppressed by these same power structures. In many cases this has been intentional. In her earlier non-fiction work (2009), Bravo

explicitly seeks to distance feminism from 'extreme' positions of bra-burning, man-hating, and lesbianism, instead aligning feminism with (nuclear) family values, business, nation-states, and working men's struggles. Feminism is thus made accommodating, approachable, accessible, and empathetic to men and men-sympathising mainstream audiences (Bravo, 2009). This departure from 'extreme' positions such as lesbianism and the rejection of hetero-femininity might be read as a move to appease a mainstream audience and persuade them that feminism is not designed to be threatening. We might ask: why not? Why should feminism not endanger the status-quo?

Bravo's short-story utopia, 'Not a Favour to Women', bears traces of her non-fiction writing and her contemporary concerns about the gendering of work occupations, women in positions of power, and (still) whether women can 'have it all'. In her professional and activist life, Bravo has worked to improve conditions for women in the workplace, basing her arguments around 'family values' and business (2009). Without denying that such work may contribute to practically improving the lives of women here and now, I seek more broadly to question feminist collaboration with business, the workplace, conservative family values, and heterosexism. My critique is with the text's easy blending of traditional utopianism with neoliberal capitalist and patriarchal discourses – dangerous entanglements which are not unique to Bravo's work. To be clear, this is not to criticise the making of feminist utopias: quite the opposite. What I take issue with is that this utopia, like mainstream feminism, is not brave enough for the emancipatory and utopian ends I think Bravo may be seeking.

In summary, the story begins in 2013, and is presented from the perspective of Anna, who, while ill, falls asleep and inadvertently time-travels (or dreams) to 2063, allowing Bravo to contrast a dystopian present with a utopian future. Conveying the utopia through the eyes of a visitor, a traditional utopian plot device (Moylan, 2014), the everyday details of life and social organisation are depicted through dialogue between Anna and her two hosts, Marion and Silvia. Framed by what might be read as a dystopic fictionalisation of present times, Bravo presents her alternative future society as an improvement, and in this way critiques current society through its contrastive depiction as dystopic.

In the world of 2013, Anna is forced by a capitalist system to work as a custodian for Lux Cleaners at Klondike Pharmaceuticals, a company described as sexist and exploitative (Bravo, 2015). Anna has been sexually assaulted at work and there are almost no scientists who are women. We learn that in this dystopic scenario 'custodial workers were always hired by a subcontractor, shifts were always changing, piss poor pay, no benefits, having to work sick' (p. 171), conditions which are obviously intended to reflect present realities. As Anna struggles through daily life we learn that rent must be paid to the landowners, health care workers are so undervalued that some cannot afford transport and electricity, and people who cannot afford healthcare are left to die or suffer with illness, uncared for by their society. Trapped in cycles which harness them to working for the profit of an elite few, most people are left with no time for other interests or education. The low pay necessitates Anna to work long hours without leave, forcing her to wean and part with her four-week-old baby, whom she is not permitted to bring to work. This utopian technique of estrangement, fictionalising the realities of the present, allows us to see the conditions of current western societies with a sharpened perspective.

Through this depiction, Bravo (2015) calls attention to a number of injustices and contradictions of capitalism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy which she later sets out to resolve. These include: the undervaluing of reproductive labour despite it being essential for supplying capitalism with workers; the requirement that people remain optimally productive in spite of their being depleted by these demands; and the neoliberal belief that people are self-

determining, notwithstanding race, gender, and class hierarchies predetermining what work is available to them (Hartmann, 1978).

In keeping with Bravo's commitment to 'family values', the place of parenting and reproduction looms large in her story. In the contrasting utopia of 2063, the most significant change has been 'protections to value families' (Bravo, 2015, p. 173), the implication of which is that work and capitalism threaten (nuclear) families. This reveals an interesting contradiction; capitalism has, historically, depended on the nuclear family structure and the separation of domestic and public spheres, both of which permit the unpaid labour of women in reproducing life (Schultheiss, 2009). In the 'dystopia' of 2013, with rules about what bodily activities are not permitted outside the home (e.g. breastfeeding), a sharp distinction is made between Anna's work as a cleaner, which is profitable for her employer, and her work as a caregiver for her baby, which is essential for the reproduction of the labour force on which capitalism depends.

In Bravo's utopia of 2063, these distinctions seem at first glance to have evaporated. On closer inspection, however, we see that what appears as an elimination of boundaries between private and public realms is rather an *incorporation* of family life *into* the workplace. This extinguishes tension between family life and work life which could be used to leverage a more fundamental critique of capitalism. Instead, the boundaries have softened so that the 'private' can be assimilated into the work sphere. This is signified by 'the bulletin board, jam-packed with pictures of babies and toddlers – but also workers with parents and partners and siblings' (Bravo, 2015, p. 173), and the day-care centre and 'lactation suite' on site (p. 174). While maternity has been subsumed by the work sphere, its physical separation from the rest of the workplace still indicates an implicit acceptance that parenting and work are different tasks, that there is a distinction between maternal (or paternal) embodiment and bodily uses which are profitable.

Notably, these workplace transformations resemble the changes made to the workplace in Jane Fonda's (1980) comedy satire *9 to 5*, clearly a source of inspiration for Bravo's short story utopia.² In this film, escalating events lead three secretaries to kidnap their sexist and egotistical boss and run the workplace themselves. However, in Bravo's utopia, unlike the film, the ironic, satirical, and parodic aspects have been lost, frustrating any sense of revelry, rebellion, or further possible change. Instead, I suggest that Bravo's 2063 future resembles what Spicer and Fleming refer to as 'the personalisation of employment', whereby modern managerialism seeks a softening of boundaries between the public and private, encouraging employees to 'express themselves' at work, melting the boundary between work and self to increase engagement of workers (Spicer and Fleming, 2016, p. 123).

Unlike feminist utopias which have engaged with such problems by imagining less privatised, non-hierarchical, and more communal alternatives to the nuclear family structure (e.g. LeGuin's *The dispossessed*, Piercy's *Woman on the edge of time*, and Joanna Russ's 1970 novel, *The female man*; see Moylan, 2014), Bravo naturalises the nuclear family. Policy 'protections to value families' (Bravo, 2015, p. 173), such as paid parental leave, constitute the biggest change to the workplace, attempting to resolve capitalism's contradictory treatment of reproductive labour. Meanwhile, the entwining of 'family values' with the naturalisation of hierarchy, racial supremacy, heterosexism, eugenics, and the control of women's reproduction (Collins, 1998) are left uncritiqued, where even the story's only lesbian character conforms to a marital and nuclear family structure. Such emphasis on reproduction, and the absence in the story of anyone without children, reinforces what Lee Edelman (2004) calls reproductive futurism, a logic of progress where 'the social *good* appears co-terminus with human *futurity*' (Sheldon, 2013, n.p.; original italics). Within such a discourse, the image of the child justifies practices of capitalist exploitation and profit accumulation that rely on 'surplus populations' (Sheldon, 2013, n.p.). At a time when Donna Haraway writes, 'make kin, not babies' (2016,

p. 102), reproductive futurity does not appear as a radical alternative to present social and environmental dilemmas. Rather, as Haraway argues, to improve the wellbeing of all people and life forms, 'it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species' (2016, p. 102). A controversial statement for sure, but equally problematic is a continued commitment to status-quo, patriarchal, and capitalist linkages of futurity and reproduction.

Harnessed to the state, Bravo's new form of near-compulsory parenthood treads a fine line between a parental paradise and just another way of bringing reproduction within the control of the state. This trusting depiction of state power departs from feminist critical utopias which critique government and representative (non-direct) democracy as sites of inequality, and depict cooperation and proximal forms of relating as preferable to nation-states and hierarchical power structures (Leeder, n.d.). Many critical feminist utopias imagine the enactment of a feminism which is not based upon women in positions of corporate power or women as heads of state, but rather the abolition of unequal distribution of power altogether (Kornegger, 2012).

Departing from this view, Bravo's utopia seems to represent an assumption that if there are women in positions of power, equality will naturally arise. Anna's hosts in this new world explain that 'part-time equity' in terms of 'advancement' and pay (Bravo, 2015, p. 174) has come about because 'the three management team leaders – what you all called a CEO? – include two women. One was hired when she was pregnant' (p. 174). In her earlier work, Bravo argues that both women and men are oppressed by certain elite men but also that 'some [elites] may wear high heels and lipstick, but regardless of gender, they're part of this group' (2009, p. 4). However, in her workplace utopia, she does not push this to its logical conclusion which would hold all forms of hierarchy to be problematic. Far from the anti-hierarchical utopias of the 1970s and 1980s, Bravo's allusion to 'leadership circles' in her utopia implies that hierarchical patterns of organising, however 'reformed', are taken as a given. Although workers in 2063 appear to have increased control, they are still subject to corporate boards and 'top pay' is up to 'twenty times the average worker's wage' (Bravo, 2015, p. 173). As Buck has noted, 'worker control is perfectly compatible with capitalist structures' (2009, p. 62), and this seems to be the case in Bravo's utopia too.

Similarly, liberal mainstream feminism assumes that gender equality can be achieved within the limits of capitalism (Prügl, 2015) and generally refrains from explicitly critiquing capitalism, the state, and all forms of authority (Jeppesen & Nazar, 2012). Instead, inclusion of women in positions of power is presented as making hierarchy and inequality more 'ethical', thereby justifying or concealing exploitation. There is slippage from celebrating 'diversity' and 'equality' to celebrating hierarchy and inequality and, in our present times, allowing its intensification. Despite so many instances of non-hierarchical feminist organising (Ehrlich, 2012; Kornegger, 2012; Farrow, 2012; Kinna, 2017), complicity with hierarchy and authority has also been a persistent feature of western feminism, as many intersectional feminists, mana wāhine, black feminists, and socialist and anarchist feminists point out. Hierarchies within feminism, particularly race and class hierarchies, have enabled a certain complicity of feminism with the very structures many feminists wish to critique. The placement of women, or more 'diverse' women, in powerful or authoritarian positions fails to end oppression (Ehrlich, 2012; Kornegger, 2012; Leeder, n.d.); this is painfully obvious when we look at the ways in which white, educated women may be enjoying more privileges and power, while the lives of women of colour and women living under colonisation have not dramatically improved. According to Prügl, liberal feminists treat gender equality as 'an asset for business and economic development' (2015, p. 614). As she explains:

Liberal feminism and individualist solutions to gender oppression are thriving as feminism is walking the halls of corporate and state power. But rather than challenging capitalism, it appears to have gone to bed with capitalism, mixing at the meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos as much as in the annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (p. 614; see also Bravo 2009).

As Kornegger suggests, it sometimes seems that (mainstream) feminism is fighting for ‘the “right” to plug into a hierarchical economy’, rather than fighting against power, exploitation, and hierarchy (2012, p. 31).

Moreover, with the neoliberal turn, women’s ‘empowerment’ comes to be conflated with successful integration into certain arenas of (androcentric) social life, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines, business, and governance – jobs with more prestige, hierarchically ordered above work related to caring, teaching, crafts, or creative endeavours. In her utopia, Bravo (2015) insinuates that in the absence of sexism, women will make the ‘rational’ choice to become scientists and leaders. People can begin as cleaners and then ‘progress’ to scientist status, and this is implied as the desirable direction. Current preoccupations with ‘encouraging’ more women into STEM disciplines and the persistent undervaluing of traditional women’s work deserve critical attention, given that activist and liberal-feminist politics persistently hold women to be the problem, rather than problematising the androcentricism of western science and the undervaluing of women’s and non-western knowledges. Posited solutions generally involve ‘changing women’s dispositions and perceptions so that they might choose, and fit better into’ STEM disciplines (Phipps, 2007, p. 768), or changing cultural beliefs about women’s abilities to succeed in STEM subjects, rather than challenging the ‘cultural masculinities’ which underlie mainstream science (Phipps, 2007, p. 771).

This liberal feminist search for women’s inclusion in androcentric paradigms, rather than challenging and interrogating these paradigms and their entanglements with patriarchy, is in keeping with the charge that liberal feminism justifies the intensification of neoliberal ideologies (Prügl, 2015). Anna is informed by her utopian hosts that ‘you want to advance, you got to work hard and have talent’ (Bravo, 2015, p. 175). The implication here is that individual women can bring about their own emancipation through individually seeking inclusion into the spheres privileged men have constructed – to ‘lean in and take advantage of the shattered glass ceiling’ (Silverman and Hagelin, 2018, p. 879). Such an individualised and aspirational imperative is characteristic of ‘the goals of mainstream feminism (often summed up as “having it all”)', which ‘serve a narrative of heteronormative careerism and neoliberal self-making’ (Silverman and Hagelin, 2018, p. 880).

In this paradise of career advancement there is no ‘outside’ to the work place; as in many twentieth-century dystopias, the happy, productive worker sees no ‘outside’ to work, the utopian state, and is therefore incapable of dissent. Herein lies the danger of traditional utopianism. As critical feminist utopian writers have proposed, it is lack of dissent and potential change that makes a utopia totalitarian (Moylan, 2014). It is only paradise if you can also *leave* (Wagner-Lawlor, 2013), and writers of feminist critical utopianism have been careful to depict this possibility (Moylan, 2014). In Bravo’s utopia on the other hand, with no ‘outside’ ever mentioned and with the workplace capable of meeting every need, work becomes world through subsuming all aspects of life. With adult education, libraries, socialising opportunities, free ‘healthy’ meals (Bravo, 2015, p. 170), paid parental leave, and on-site childcare, Bravo’s utopia is reminiscent of the ‘progressive’ contemporary workplace. It is almost indistinguishable from, for example, Google’s workplace, which provides employees with ‘free healthy and gourmet meals, laundry and fitness facilities, generous paid parental leave, and on-site childcare’ and ‘flexibility to work on passion projects and tap into their creativity’ with the aim of building ‘a more creative, satisfied, and intimate community of employees’ (Gillett, 2016, n.d.). It all sounds

fantastic, like the digitalisation of our lives, everything in one place, a cosy capitalism. Yet, with everything in one place, much like the digitalisation of everyday life, there is no escape. Spicer and Fleming cite a study of a large US bank which began providing services such as childcare, a car service, and meals in an effort to transform the workplace into 'a home away from home', dissolving previous barriers which separated work from home, leisure, and life (Spicer and Fleming, 2016, p. 123). Posited in liberating terms, these developments enabled employees to 'access the work-flow process whenever they liked, include personal events and interests in the office schedule, and cultivate a workplace climate that was almost indistinguishable from living as such' (Spicer & Fleming, 2016, p. 123). With no boundaries separating personal concerns from their job, employees were 'completely overtaken by work' and no longer had a life outside of their workplace (Spicer & Fleming, 2016, p. 123). Rather than cutting-edge, work-home blurring seems a little all too familiar: 'a woman's work is never done'.

Dissent is past. In Bravo's utopia, revolution is done and dusted, existing only in the past – a past that enabled this feminist future by having put 'the power where it's supposed to be, in the people' and not letting 'the planet go up in flames' (2015, p. 175). The idea of social transformation is made safe by its retention within the limits of a naturalised capitalism, a revolutionary impulse tamed through the depiction of having already happened so that it can now sink into irrelevance. The people's reclaiming of power and planet-saving seem to mainly serve as a means of 'cleaning up' capitalism rather than creating something different. Perhaps most dangerously, the fact that many dominant social structures remain – such as capitalism, reproductive futurity, and unequal power hierarchies – only reinforces a discourse that such systems are natural, inevitable, or 'the people's choice'.

When Anna returns to 2013 she will not be able to remember what she has seen of the future so that she 'won't interfere with history' (Bravo, 2015, p. 176); the word 'interfere' implies a 'right' way for the future to unfold. However, it also suggests the future may be malleable, and it is possible to read a certain open-endedness, as Anna is told:

'But there is something you'll take back with you', Marion said. 'You'll dare to dream the world you know you deserve and you won't settle for anything less. You'll know that change is possible. And you'll know that it's people just like you who will make it happen' (p. 176).

When she returns, what world will Anna dream of? Will it be different from the utopia depicted, thus implying that the future is open-ended? There is a utopian impulse (Bloch, 2009) in this, yet its potential for inciting action has already been undermined through a pre-determined view of the future panning out happily. It becomes a comforting narrative about the natural outcome of progress, rather than a call to action (Moylan, 2014). Comforting, not just because it is a particularly cosy vision of the future, but comfortable in the sense that it is rather too familiar. If Bravo means to suggest that the world she depicts is the one Anna will imagine and bring about when she wakes, then Bravo seems to imply that aspiring to a reformed version of capitalism is the best that can be hoped for. Indeed, even that people like Anna 'will make it happen' is more a sinister statement of fact than a call to action, because of course it is the people doing the work, the working classes and women, who carry out the action of history necessary for capitalism and patriarchy to exist; they are the people who make things happen.

Depictions of incremental change may help make the idea of utopianism and feminism palatable in the present. Yet it is important to consider *how* certain ideas of the future come to be considered incremental, realistic, or radical and to *whom*. That is, if Bravo's utopia seems believable or pragmatic from certain perspectives, it may have more to do with its likeness to what dominant discourses and power structures make believable and possible, and what they insist to be the inevitable and natural outcome (Wagner-Lawlor, 2013; Sargisson, 1996). It is

not necessarily more pragmatic to collaborate with and seek to appease the powerful because ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (Lorde, 1997, p. 380). The rejection of dominant ideologies and the imagining of something else is a practical task for the survival of feminism for which co-optation poses a ‘treacherous’ threat (Kornegger, 2012, p. 32). This story contains warning, but perhaps also, as for Anna, awakening.

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Notes

1 For more discussion of feminist critical utopian texts, see Moylan (2014).

2 Likewise, the association for which Bravo was director, also named *9to5*, is said to have inspired Fonda’s film (Genasci, 1995).

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