

## Book Review: The Politics of the Body by Alison Phipps

*In **The Politics of the Body**, Alison Phipps looks to construct a political sociology of women's bodies around key debates: sexual violence, gender and Islam, sex work and motherhood. In unveiling the intimate links in politics, popular culture and the media between prevailing neoliberal/neoconservative discourses, feminism, and the body, Alison Phipps contributes greatly to uncovering hidden methods of political and social domination, writes Sarah Burton.*

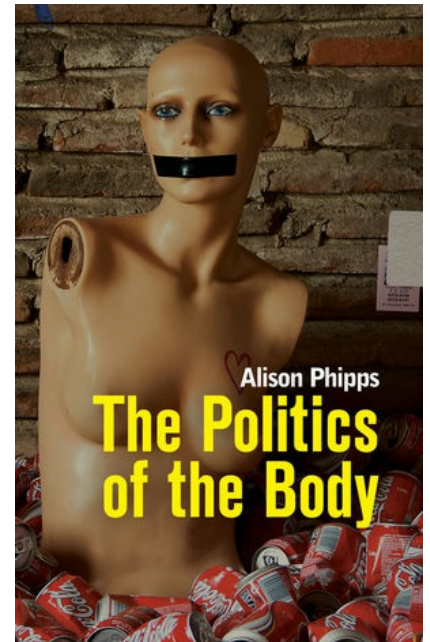


**The Politics of the Body. Alison Phipps. Polity. February 2014.**

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The central argument of Alison Phipps' new book – that in the twenty first century the politics of neoliberalism and neoconservatism share common actions of power which oppress women's bodies and produce gender inequalities – is one which deserves to be heard widely and loudly. *The Politics of the Body* uses data gathered from popular culture, media, policy and contemporary politics to explore the effect that discourses of individualization and moralization associated with neoliberalism and neoconservatism have on women's bodies.

The book is split into four key areas: sexual violence and victimhood; gender and Islam; the sex industry and commodification; reproduction and breastfeeding. The analysis itself is based upon Foucauldian notions of genealogy in which the concern is with 'how the discussions are themselves constructed' (p.4). Phipps' aim in approaching the material this way is in 'looking critically at the taken-for-granted meanings which populate social and political spheres and uncovering their underlying assumptions'. *The Politics of the Body* thus explicitly reveals the complicity of mainstream western feminism with totalising, power-driven discourses of contemporary neoliberal and neoconservative politics. Phipps asserts that the 'explosion of market-based choices which has come to inform the social construction of identities' (p.9) is directly related to 'problematic developments' in contemporary mainstream feminism in which 'a focus on women's agency and identity [occurs] at the expense of examining framing structures' (p.3). The identification of this relationship is a key strength of the book.



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In the chapter "Sexual Violence and the Politics of Victimhood", Phipps examines the cases of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, politician Dominique Strauss-Khan, and film-maker Roman Polanski. The chapter focuses on the support given to all three men, the 'backlash against feminism', and the way in which the 'dominant neoliberal/neoconservative framework and prevailing political conditions' gave rise to conditions which produced 'rape-apologism and victim-blaming from a variety of quarters' (p.21). Phipps identifies, for instance, that the backing of Assange was 'inspired by the belief that the matter was part of a larger neoconservative persecution of a prominent dissident' (p.22) and links this to similar support for Polanski, which positioned him as 'the victim of a vengeful US criminal justice system' (p.23) and was implicitly predicated on Polanski's position as a subversive – and talented – artist. Like these men, the support for Strauss-Khan among the left-wing French political elite drew on the idea that his 'elevated status' meant he should not be treated as would any other.



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In this chapter Phipps develops the link between discourses of individualization in neoliberal politics and the status of the victim of sexual violence. Phipps shows how reprimands to the victims of Assange, Polanski, and Strauss-Khan were built upon the notion of personal responsibility, noting that 'neoliberal values such as competition, consumption and deregulation have moved...into our "common sense" beliefs' (p.28). This in turn produces a subject who is 'risk-managing and responsible for their own destiny' (p.28). The result of this, in all cases, was attacks made in terms of 'now-familiar rape myths and victim-blaming tropes' (p.29). What is most interesting about this chapter is the way in which it shows complicity in gender inequality on all sides of the political spectrum, but most especially from avowed public feminists. Phipps, for example, discusses US feminist [Naomi Wolf's open advocacy for Assange](#) which drew on rape myths, including the idea that not offering resistance to rape is tantamount to consent to sex (pp.29-30).

Phipps builds on the commonalities between the attempts of right and left wing politics to control and police women's bodies in the third chapter, "Gender and Islam in a Neoconservative World". In this chapter Phipps shows how both right and left oriented constructions of Muslim women homogenize their bodies and identities, thus erasing their voices and right to speak. On the right, Phipps identifies an 'Orientalist construction of "Muslim women" as victims in relation to issues such as veiling, honour killings, forced marriage and female genital cutting (termed "mutilation" in this framework)' and notes that these ideas have often 'been deployed in the service of colonial and neocolonial aims' (p.53). On the left, the focus is on 'Muslim women's agency and resistance' and a 'critique of the liberal notions of freedom and autonomy which position women in Muslim-majority countries and communities as oppressed' (p.53). Phipps makes the argument that on both sides a 'politics of "voice" has emerged in which personal narratives are used as the main evidence of cultural oppression or empowerment' (p.72); this ascendancy of voice is linked therefore to discourses of the individual and personal in neoconservative and neoliberal politics. Based on this Phipps criticizes not only the moralizing of neoconservatism, which exploits problems of gender inequality to enact (neo)colonial objectives, but also the frameworks supplied by left-wing groups and postcolonial academics which Phipps views as reducing 'structural oppressions to issues of personal feeling' (p.72). This chapter, while less dense with concrete examples, does draw on debates surrounding the 'war on terror' and French legislation against face-veiling by Muslim women in order to tease out the interplay between gender, Islam, and neoconservative politics. It does however, lack the precision of the analysis which has gone before, making the argument – whilst cogent – feel less tangible and hence less of a revelation or 'uncovering' as the genealogical analysis might intend.

In unveiling the intimate links in politics, popular culture and the media between prevailing neoliberal/neoconservative discourses, feminism and the body, Alison Phipps contributes greatly to uncovering

hidden methods of political and social domination. I found it surprising that a project which bears so much comparison with aims of Critical Social Science (uncovering hidden domination), structure and agency did not engage with either [Pierre Bourdieu](#) (2005) or [Luc Boltanski](#) (2011), but this absence itself only provides further scope in the life of the book – and it must be noted that this is a densely-referenced and extremely well-researched text. Equally there were moments when I wished for more concrete empirical examples of the phenomena Phipps claims is in action, as well as some justification for the examples that were used (which can appear randomly chosen). This, however, is not to detract from a book which is comprehensive, accessible, and crucial both to political and social scientists, but also to considering our everyday practices of feminism.

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**Sarah Burton** is currently an ESRC-funded doctoral candidate at Goldsmiths College. Her research uses the concept of mess to investigate the value system(s) underpinning the production of knowledge in contemporary social theory. Having also spent several years involved in various artistic projects centring round theatre, classical music and writing/publishing, her academic research draws both on her formal education and also these forms of creative practice. Sarah convenes the British Sociological Association Postgraduate Forum and Activism in Sociology Forum, of which she is a founding member. Sarah also does lots of 'fringe' academia and is part of the collective working on the [Woman Theory](#) project. [Read more reviews by Sarah.](#)

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