

Feminist Politics: facing the future *

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1. Main Issues in Feminist Analysis of Politics

Thirty years ago, women were poised before what promised to be a whole new era for feminist politics.

There was an accumulation of aspirations as more women flooded into universities and the labour market; an explosion of resentments against the continuing trivialisation and disparagement of 'the feminine'; and an increasingly confident critique of the social and political theories that so grabbed our contemporaries but paid scant attention to gender inequalities or the situation of women. It was a time of great inventiveness and innovation, perhaps particularly so because one of the characteristics of the moment was that most of us knew little of what had gone before. We might have read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*; we had some hazy ideas about the battles women had fought to win their right to vote; but much of the previous history of feminist thinking and agitation was still shrouded in forgetfulness and indifference. We knew very little about our precursors.

Partly because of this, the feminism of the 1970s drew eclectically on a wide range of disciplines and sources, drawing variously from literature and anthropology and history and marxism to construct new ways of understanding the world. **Feminism was almost by definition interdisciplinary**: for positive reasons, because the connections we needed to make did not fit the standard academic divides; but also just for practical reasons, because there was no obvious tradition into which feminism could fit. The subsequent proliferation of feminist research and scholarship has changed the context, and it is frequently noted that **the later developments have brought more specialisation - and therefore more fragmentation - within feminist research**. Work in the humanities became increasingly separate from work in the social sciences, and within each field, **feminists came to engage more directly with mainstream thinking**, taking up positions within and against the mainstream rather than debating more exclusively among themselves.

Much of this has been extraordinarily productive. **In my own field of feminist political theory, there has been an explosion of critical work** taking on the leading political theorists whose ideas frame current normative conceptions; and a much more explicit focus on the way the discourses of political life operate in the inclusion or exclusion of women. In the process, there was what one might describe as a 'turn towards politics' within feminist research.

I want to start by pulling out **three themes in the feminist analysis of politics**, two that were particularly crucial through the 1970s, and a third that has come to frame much of our understanding today. Two themes dominated in an earlier stage, **the first being the separation between public and private**, the second, the false definition of politics as what goes on in the public sphere. Both these were presented as ways of understanding women's exclusion from full citizenship. Women were seen as confined to a private, domestic sphere: either practically confined, by their responsibilities for childcare and housework, or conceptually confined by an imaginary that could only perceive women in their capacity as wives or mothers and persistently failed to register their presence elsewhere. Women were associated with the private, and men with the public worlds of politics and work, and so long as this separation held, there was little prospect of women taking their place as full and equal citizens. Winning the equal right to vote was never going to be enough to achieve the necessary equalisation. **We needed a more fundamental reshaping of the division between public and private that would finally break its association with gender**: men and women equally involved in care work, men and women equally involved in paid employment, men and women equally engaged in political life.

This was one way in which the exclusion of women from political life was addressed. The other noted that **it wasn't so much that women were being excluded from political activity, but rather that their activities were excluded from the way politics was defined**. Politics had come to be perceived in a very narrow – 'masculinist' - way as what went on in parliaments and parties, and what revolved around divisions of class. This was the point (or part of the point) of that famous slogan about the personal being political. Women's preoccupations were continually devalued as non-political: where was the politics, we were asked, in trying to achieve a fairer division of household labour, securing women from domestic violence, tackling sexist behaviour or the treatment of women as sex objects? So it was supposed to 'political' to join a socialist group but not to join a consciousness raising group with a bunch of other women; 'political' to demonstrate against the government but not to campaign for more nurseries or the right to abortion; 'political' to attend the meetings of your trade union but laughably irrelevant to object to the sexist language that prevailed in such meetings. Feminists took issue with this understanding of political life.

The two challenges came from different directions, but were not necessarily contradictory. You could say that women were being excluded from what was conventionally regarded as politics and also say that women's political activism was being rendered invisible by a presumption that what they did was not really political. It was entirely coherent to say both things at once, though there was certainly some difference of emphasis between those who then stressed the need to get women into the public world of conventional politics, and those who queried whether that public world was as important as it claimed to be. But between them, these two positions set the framework for much of the earlier discussion of politics. We had to challenge the separation of public from private; and we had to challenge the limited ways in which politics was being defined.

The third theme developed later, and developed partly because those earlier problems were beginning to be resolved. The more overt exclusions are less self-evident today. We don't live in a world where men are defined as workers and breadwinners, women as mothers and housewives; and the declining significance of political parties, combined with the declining centrality of class, has itself contributed to a broader

understanding of politics. People more commonly talk of the significance of new social movements or the importance of associations in civil society, and in doing so, they share with that earlier feminist critique a recognition that politics is about more than what goes on in parliaments and political parties. Yet with all the changes, women still felt written out of the story, and feminists have increasingly identified the indifference to gender difference (as indeed to other kinds of difference) as a crucial part of the tale.

It has become clear that the failure to incorporate women as full citizens is not just about what goes on in the family or the labour market – those deep structures of inequality, confinement or exclusion that may be denying women full access to political life. The failures of citizenship are also linked to a discourse of abstraction, impartiality, and neutrality that pretends to ignore differences of sex and gender, but does so in a manner that confirms the masculine subject as the norm. The conventions of contemporary politics tell us that all citizens are equal regardless of their sex or race, that it is inappropriate to focus on irrelevancies like whether leader X is a man or representative Y a woman, or that homing in on gender or ‘women’s issues’ represents a very partial, limited, trivial understanding of politics. These restrictions are sometimes imposed with the best of intentions, by people who agree with what they take to be the feminist ideal – that sex should be irrelevant to politics. The effect, however, is to make it virtually impossible to challenge the current imbalance of power.

What we have seen over the last fifteen years is a deeper investigation of pretended gender neutrality, of the false abstractions that seem to deny the political relevance of gender but do so in such a way as to reinforce the political dominance of the male. These investigations have tracked a wider debate in feminist thinking on the significance of the body and embodiment: the absurdity of thinking of individuals in isolation from the bodies through which they live their lives, as if we can somehow suspend the ‘accidents’ of body shape, skin colour, genitalia, and isolate some more meaningful human core. They have also tracked the critique in feminist philosophy of the so-called ‘view from nowhere’, the ‘God’s eye view’ from which we are supposed to make our political judgements and political decisions. Much of the work of feminist philosophers and political theorists has been devoted to exposing the ‘false’ universalisms of mainstream theory: the elevation of a self-owning (masculine) individual as the supposed subject of liberal contract theory(1); the association of universality with impartiality, and the injunction this places on subordinated social groups to put their own ‘partial’ needs to one side(2); the cultivation of conceptions of rationality and justice that expel any element of emotion or care. We have challenged the idea that to be a good citizen is to put one’s own particularity (gender, disability, ethnicity, race) to one side; the notion that the good voter chooses on the basis of political programmes and never bothers herself with whether the candidates are female or male; the belief that politics should be about some glorious common good and never our particular interests and concerns.

In some cases, the object of the argument has been to develop a different understanding of universalism that detaches it from its masculine provenance; in others, there has been a more trenchant critique of the very possibility of universal theory or norms. In all cases, feminists have raised problems about the way the norms and perspectives of particular social groups (largely male) come to claim the authority of ‘universal’ truth, and the taken-for-grantedness of power relations that had become so ‘naturalised’ we could not even see them

as expressing particular preoccupations and concerns. **Difference then emerged as a central category**: you cannot address conflicts of interest or relations of exclusion simply by appealing to citizens to transcend their differences; on the contrary, we have to start from those differences.

2. Mixed Gains

There are two aspects to this I want to comment on – both of which fall into the category of mixed gains. **The first is that focusing on the presumptions underpinning current discourses of politics has moved us away from an earlier, more base-superstructure, framework that tended to treat the patterns of political life as a reflection of deeper structures elsewhere**. In the earlier paradigm that focused on the separation of public from private, one would explain the under-representation of women in politics, for example, by reference to the continuing sexual division of labour within the family and labour market. So long as women carry the primary responsibilities for housework and childcare, they are obviously going to find it difficult to participate equally in politics with men: they won't have the time for political meetings or party activism, and will find it much harder than men to envisage a full time political career. It is also the case that if women are less well represented than men in the kinds of jobs that have tended to lead towards political activism and influence (if they are excluded, that is, from certain sectors of the labour market), they are less likely to be well represented among political leaders or representatives.

There is clearly a casual relationship here, and I don't at all want to deny the impact of these economic inequalities on our chances for political equality. But that base-superstructure argument now appears more problematic: first, because it does not address the additional effects of pretended gender-neutrality; secondly, because it leaves no strategy for political change. We are left waiting on deep changes in employment or family structures- changes in the economic 'base' – that will eventually work their way through to improvements in political equality. Failing concerted action on the under-representation of women, however, it is unlikely that we will get the kind of policy changes that might begin to equalise care responsibilities between women and men or change the sexual segregation of the labour force. Moreover, while much has already changed in family and employment structures – which no longer conform to notions of women as simply confined to the domestic sphere – these changes do not seem to feed through automatically into fuller citizenship for women. **We have to act now on the policy agenda, and that means acting on the political exclusion of women and gender**.

I see this recognition – reflected as it has been in European wide (not to say global) initiatives to challenge women's political under-representation – very much as a gain. Like all gains, however, it is mixed. **The heightened activism around why gender matters in politics, particularly when translated into an exclusive preoccupation with getting more women into politics, threatens to break the link with grass-roots activism that was more characteristic of earlier years. It also encourages us to focus on political inclusion as if it were entirely separate from economic and social inclusion**, as if challenging the indifference to gender difference or raising the proportion of women in politics is itself enough of a change. This shift away from the economic and the social has been particularly troubling in the context of a widescale retreat from redistributive politics that has been characteristic of virtually all politics in the last decades. For a long time, feminists were notable for holding out against this trend, and sometimes seemed the only people around still worrying about

problems of poverty, low pay, inequality in the distribution of resources; still holding on to a materialism that recognised the importance of economic and social conditions. I see rather less of this in the current climate. In the context of increasing neo-liberalism, a seemingly universal consensus on the 'naiveties' of egalitarianism, and a major restructuring of the post-war welfare states, this should be cause for concern.

The second (also mixed) gain is that the critique of false neutrality and false impartiality has led into a more generalised 'politics of difference' that links hierarchies of gender with hierarchies of race and ethnicity, seeing these as connected, not just as examples of inequality and oppression, but as examples of oppression that share a common structure. In each case, the failure to recognise people as equals seems to be bound up in some way with the inability to accept difference; it is assumed that those marked by difference (and it is always the people on the margins who get marked by their difference while the others are somehow seen as the norm) should bring themselves into line with the others in their society in order to be included as full members. So society should treat its black citizens 'as if' they were white, should treat Muslims 'as if' they were Christians – and in return for this favour, members of minority ethnic or religious groups are supposed to conduct themselves more like the majority. This assimilationist model has increasingly fallen into disrepute, and the arguments against it share a good deal of common ground with those developed by feminists in their critique of impartiality or gender neutrality. Many of the insights of feminism have revolved around its treatment of the relationship between equality and difference. These insights have obvious bearing on issues of ethnicity and race.

The resulting broadening of feminist politics has been one of the gains of recent years, but it brings with it a number of risks. One of these is that the placing of gender in a lengthening list of differences- gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, disability, and the endemic etcetera – is disturbingly reminiscent of the lists our old socialist class warriors used to draw up when finally forced to acknowledge that class was not the only divide. That earlier list effectively consigned feminist politics to a footnote, and I think we should be wary of similar pressures in the present moment. The intersection and resemblance between these different forms of oppression is, in my view, highly significant and important – but each also has its own specificity and we should not lose sight of this.

The other risk is that the coincidence of concerns between feminism and multiculturalism could lead to the paralysis of cultural relativism. Most countries in Europe are multi-ethnic and multicultural, and most are grappling (with different degrees of seriousness and success) with developing a conception of citizenship that can recognise diversity and treat all citizens as equals without thereby compelling them to become the same. The critique of assimilation that underpins multicultural politics clearly shares much with feminist critiques of pretended gender-neutrality. For many feminists, the association is reinforced by the knowledge that Western feminism too often read the world off the experience of white middle-class women, and failed to recognise the very different experiences and priorities of women depending on their class, race, ethnicity, religion or nationality. But if the seemingly shared concerns make it impossible for women identified with one culture to criticise what they regard as the sexually oppressive practices of another, this pushes towards a form of cultural relativism that is not, in my view, compatible with feminism. If, moreover, respect for cultural difference leads to a hands-off attitude towards cultural practices that undermine the freedom and equality of women, the support for multiculturalism could weaken rather than strengthen women's position.

A recent working party on forced marriages in Britain (3) (set up by the Home Office after a High Court decision that parents taking their daughters abroad to marry them against their will were guilty of child abduction) noted that police and social workers were often reluctant to challenge forced marriages because of a perception that this was meddling in other people's religious beliefs or cultural norms. **Feminists should be the last to fall into this trap, not only because we will be more alert than others to relations of dominance between women and men, but also because our critique of false commonality should make us wary of claims made on behalf of an undifferentiated cultural norm.** 'Culture' is always a contentious term in this context, potentially obscuring differences between women and men, young and old, in the interpretations of a supposedly shared culture, and threatening to solidify the interpretations of a dominant group. Yet all too often, it is the men within each community who become the recognised spokespeople for its culture or cultural traditions, often justifying practices that are at odds with sexual equality.

Because of this, it is sometimes argued that the rights claims of individuals should 'trump' the rights claims of cultural groups, that the overriding obligation in liberal democracies is to protect individual women and men against illiberal practices in minority cultures, and that cultural claims should therefore be discounted. Yet there are dangers with this approach, which threatens to overlook serious issues of equity between majority and minority groups, and risks reinforcing images of minority (often immigrant) cultures as illiberal and pre-modern. Since culture matters to women as well as to men, it is at least plausible that the needs of women in minority cultures are better met through policies of multiculturalism than any simple dismissal of cultural claims.

As Europe moves into a more self-conscious multiculturalism, we can expect to encounter many areas of tension between gender and cultural equality, and the complex issues raised by multicultural citizenship are likely to be central to the development of feminist politics through the coming years. **We have to beware of an uncritical accommodation of cultural 'tradition'** that takes tradition as interpreted by the (usually) male spokespeople of ethnic or religious minorities, and fails to engage with issues of sexual equality. **But we should also recognise that the sexual equality agenda can be mobilised in dishonest ways,** by people who see this as a way of disparaging or dismissing the claims of minority groups but otherwise display no particular commitment to women's equality. **The nuancing of our understandings of equality and difference will be one of the challenges we face over the next thirty years.** This challenge has been put on the agenda by the development of a more generalised 'politics of difference', much indebted to developments in feminist thought. We are unlikely to meet that challenge if we presume in advance either that minorities must conform to majority practices or that there are no tensions between sexual and cultural equality.

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