

[Anne Phillips](#)

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Feminism and Republicanism: Is This a Plausible Alliance?

Anne Phillips¹

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The relationship between feminism and republicanism has recently undergone a marked transformation, from erstwhile antagonists to possible friends. In its classical formulations, republicanism is far from woman-friendly. Indeed, there seem few traditions worse suited to alliance with feminism than one that has viewed freedom as a matter of what goes on in the public rather than private realm, and has regarded the homely activities of the domestic sphere as a drain on the manly heroisms of public life. Yet there have been moves in recent years to realign feminism with the republican tradition, one measure of this being the unexpected revival of interest in Hannah Arendt. Once dismissed as hopelessly 'male-stream' in her contempt for household idiocy and glorification of the public realm², Arendt has since been recruited as a potential source for women's movement politics. Mary Dietz sees her as an important counterweight to those strands of feminism that have sentimentalised the virtues of the private sphere, and describes her as providing feminist thinkers 'with a way to proceed towards politics'.³ A recent collection is entirely devoted to feminist interpretations of Hannah Arendt.⁴

Republicanism is being reclaimed as one of the formative influences on feminism - perhaps as influential as the liberalism that once took most of the credit⁵ - and a number of theorists argue that women would do well to draw more closely on this heritage. It has been

suggested that feminism could consolidate its already strong commitment to participatory democracy if it aligned itself with the republican rather than liberal tradition⁶; that such an alignment would make it easier to detach the case for women's political representation from narrow notions about women representing only women's interests⁷; or make it easier for feminists to distance themselves from the divisiveness of identity politics.⁸

In her introduction to a collection of readings on **Feminism, the Public and the Private**,⁹ Joan Landes makes the point that the feminist preoccupation with personal life should not be seen as a backing away from public participation. On the contrary, since feminist politics has been very much about making public matters that were previously considered private, it has usually attached great weight to activities in the public sphere. In recent years, this more 'public' face of feminism has been most evident in the critical dialogue that has developed with Habermasian analyses of the public sphere¹⁰ and, more generally, in feminist explorations of communicative and deliberative democracy¹¹, for much of the work on civic republicanism has taken a communitarian turn that many feminists find more troubling. But whether the links with republicanism are direct or tangential, there is undoubtedly a new focus in feminist writing on the nature of the public sphere. Discussions that once focused on feminism's uneasy positioning between liberal and socialist traditions now more commonly invoke republicanism as well.

Why Republicanism?

This revival of interest parallels a wider recuperation in contemporary political thought. Inspired particularly by the work of J.G.A.Pocock and Quentin Skinner¹², historians of ideas have been excavating a distinctively republican tradition from the distortions and misrepresentations that piled up in subsequent centuries; in doing so, they have significantly altered our understanding of the Western political heritage.¹³ For most of those involved in this process of historical correction, the recuperation of republicanism has been a political as well as

intellectual project. Various called upon as a critique of liberalism, totalitarianism, and the vapidness of mass society, the tradition has provided an alternative vantagepoint from which to view the inadequacies of the contemporary world.

Hannah Arendt was a crucial early figure in this realignment, and in Arendt's diagnosis of twentieth century ailments, just about everything one could think of had gone wrong. In its terrifying combination of 'reckless optimism' with 'reckless despair'¹⁴, totalitarianism had abdicated responsibility for human action and choice: no need to agonise over what is just or legitimate; put yourself at the service of inexorable forces; let the ends justify the means. In the more protected zones of constitutional democracy, there was also little cause for celebration. Arendt saw the political order being downgraded to the status of a marketplace, with politics becoming the pursuit of interest or administration of economic growth. Even the more humane concern with poverty or hunger was, in her view, an abdication of political freedom, for when the poor 'appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them.... freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life-process itself'.¹⁵ People had come to believe they lived in a free republic if they only had their civil rights and freedoms; but they had mistaken the 'preliminaries of civilised government'¹⁶ for its substance, and forgotten that 'political freedom, generally speaking, means the right "to be a participator in government", or it means nothing.'¹⁷ In pursuit of first the necessities and later the luxuries of life, people had lost their taste for public freedom. Politics had effectively disappeared.

On a number of points, Arendt's version of republicanism has become deeply unfashionable. Few now endorse the preference she suggested for direct over representative democracy, while no-one argues that the vitality of public life depends on keeping 'social' questions about poverty or hunger so resolutely out of debate. Most also distance themselves from an element that was never part of Arendt's thinking: the image of the republic as a

homogeneous community reaching agreement on its common good. At a deeper level, however, late twentieth century discussions of republicanism have continued to develop the thesis about the individual getting the better of the citizen, and J.G.A.Pocock has described his work on civic humanism as telling its story 'in terms borrowed from or suggested by the language of Hannah Arendt'¹⁸. Among political philosophers, the continuities have been particularly marked: Sheldon Wolin's analysis of the history of Western political thought as the history of the subordination of politics to society¹⁹; Michael Sandel's contention that democracy is now valued only as a way of securing people in the pursuit of their private (by implication, rather sordid) interests and ends²⁰; or Benjamin Barber's critique of liberal politics as akin to zoo-keeping, dedicated only to keeping the wild beasts apart.²¹

In its later twentieth-century incarnation, republicanism has come to revolve around three themes. (None of these, it should be noted, has much to say on the more popular understanding of republicanism as a critique of monarchical power). There is a distaste for interest-group pluralism as reducing politics to an amoral bargaining and exchange; a dissatisfaction with definitions of freedom as merely the freedom from coercion or interference; and a perception that contemporary societies are experiencing a worrying decline in the quality of their public life. Interest-group pluralism had been criticised by Marxists for glossing over the systemic inequalities that leave one group incomparably more powerful than another. From the perspective of the latter-day republican, the further problem is that the huckstering and bargaining of contemporary politics leaves no space for considerations of what is right or just, no space for deliberation on public affairs. When public policy is treated as a by-product of competing private interest (in Harold Lasswell's famous phrase, a matter of who gets what, when, and how), this not only disadvantages the weaker groups in society. It also empties the 'public' of any real meaning, making a mockery of notions of the public good. For most of those

who develop this theme, the intention is not to resuscitate Rousseauian fantasies of a general will; most contemporary republicans have been as suspicious as anyone of appeals to a unified common good. But public interest should not be treated just as an amalgam of private preferences. Public life should be more than a vehicle for looking after one's own.

The second theme addresses what has become a dominant understanding of freedom in modern liberal democracies: the notion that individuals are free so long as no-one interferes with them, so long as no-one stops them doing what they have chosen to do. Here too, there has been a classically Marxist critique, to the effect that it is nonsensical to describe people as free just because no-one holds a gun to their heads, and that failing the material resources that enable people to activate their so-called choices, 'freedom' remains an empty word. The republican response (particularly as developed in works by Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit²²) focuses more on relations of dependency and domination. If freedom were simply a matter of non-interference, we might have to say that a slave left alone by a lazy or absentee master enjoyed full liberty; or that a wife cherished by her accommodating husband was as free as a bird, even when the laws of her society denied her any independent status. In the republican conception, neither of these would make much sense. A people that lives at the discretion of its rulers cannot be described as free, even when fortunate enough to live under rulers who choose not to interfere. Servitude is servitude even when the master is accommodating. The only free people are those who govern themselves.

The third concern that underpins much of the current interest in republicanism is the belief that modernity has tipped the balance from the public towards the private, reduced the role of public discussion or the use of public space, and generally contributed to what Richard Sennett calls 'the fall of public man'.²³ Some explain this by reference to a proceduralist liberalism that backs away from substantive public discussion of disputed issues of politics or

morality, and tries to cope with the pluralism of modern society by leaving more matters up to the individuals themselves.²⁴ But the processes at work are also economic and social: a continuing marketisation that turns previously public activities into matters for private consumption; a pre-packaging of opinions through the mass media that discourages political dialogue and deliberation; an intensification of labour that leads people to seek their fulfilment primarily at home. Though the details are continually contested, there is a widely shared perception that public life has been impoverished and public spiritedness is on the decline. Much of the current interest in republicanism speaks to this concern.

Feminist Connections

On each of these themes, there are points of contact and points of contention with feminist thinking. This is not only because feminisms are various, ranging through almost every point on the liberal/communitarian axis or every point in the modernity/post-modernity debate. It is also, more interestingly, because those drawn to the republican tradition have also turned out to be those most critical of the way its exponents develop their themes. The critique of interest-driven politics, for example, has been welcomed for the way it opens up the possibility of a politics devoted to justice, but simultaneously condemned for depriving women of their distinct or separate voice. The critique of dependency resonates powerfully with a long history of women's movement politics, but to the extent that it conceives of independence as a political – rather than social and economic – condition, it is also out of tune with many later preoccupations. The importance attached to the sphere of public life speaks volumes to the women who have long felt excluded from this sphere, but also infuriates with its seeming disparagement of those activities that have continued to define most women's lives. The resulting ambiguities make for a complex relationship, which is best understood against the background of feminism's persistent unease with the liberal tradition. Feminism was born (in a sense) out of liberalism, but

has nearly always been at odds with its origins, and feminists have long sought inspiration in traditions that contest the liberal hegemony. For many post-sixties' feminists, it was a revised version of socialism that provided the framework for this, but as socialism lost its organising power (partly because of those feminist revisions) it became necessary to look elsewhere. Part of the contemporary attraction of republicanism is that it offers a substitute for socialism as a way of maintaining the necessary distance from the liberal tradition.

1. Interest

The republican critique of interest-group politics resonates with a longstanding feminist dissatisfaction with the politics of the marketplace: a perception that the politics of bargains and contracts will reinforce the position of those groups that are already more powerful; but also a deeper perception that it is at odds with female experience. The relationship of mothers to children, for example, often involves putting the needs of others above one's own, and a concern for the empowerment of one's children who will then grow away from one into independence. Redescribing this in terms of a rational pursuit of long-term interest (you do your best for your children either because they are 'your own' or so that they can repay you at some later stage) hardly captures the nature of this relationship, and feminist reflection on this has generated a substantial literature on the ethics of care.²⁵ Most feminist work on citizenship and democracy draws on this to some extent, and it is widely argued that the inclusion of women as full citizens should alter the texture of democratic politics as well as its personnel.²⁶ The obsession with self and self-ownership is a luxury few women have been able to afford; to this extent, it has been felt to reflect a very masculine conception of politics.

The second reason why interest seems such a poor vehicle for feminist concerns is that it suggests something pre-given and fixed. Underlying virtually all feminist politics is a belief that we have grown up in inequitable power relations, and that women, as well as men, may

internalise these relations to make them seem inevitable or right. It is only rarely that people can make the imaginative leap into entirely different relations and the claims we then make (or the interests we express) often appear as mild variants on current conditions. Thus, mothers living in a society that has long practised female genital mutilation may well express the wish that their daughters should be operated on in more hygienic conditions than they experienced themselves, but may find it harder simply to refuse the operation because of a fear that this will make their daughters unmarriageable. Wives living in a society that has long allocated all the domestic labour to women may express a wish that men should take more of their share, but often find the demand for total equalisation inappropriate, utopian, 'unnatural'. Freud was not the only one to feel confused about what women want, for wants are formed under the constraints of existing conditions, and they alter when new possibilities emerge. One problem with the interest-driven conception of politics is that it finds it hard to address this phenomenon. This makes it a poor vehicle for any politics that is about challenging deep structures and age-old relations.

For both these reasons, feminists find much that is congenial in the republican critique, but usually stop short at the point where republicanism threatens to abandon a belief in conflicts of interest. Particularly in its incarnations in the USA (where there is an understandable revulsion against what political scientists term 'pork-barrel' politics), civic republicanism has come to be associated with ideals of transcendence, with appeals to citizens to turn away from their selfish, parochial preoccupations to address matters of more general concern. Invoking ideals of public virtue against private selfishness, many republicans look to the institutions of self-government to achieve something grander than just the protection of individual or group interest: something more along the lines of just laws, the greatest mutual benefit, perhaps even that old chestnut, the common good. Sandel, for example, not only sets a high value on

public service and political participation. He also sees freedom as depending on the willingness to put the common good above private interests and concerns. This rings alarm bells for feminists, many of whom will ask what guarantee there is that women's interests and preoccupations will be incorporated into this 'common' good. Almost by definition, women's politics insists on there being some difference between men's and women's interests – some difference and also some conflict - and it is often the moment when women come to recognise this difference that sparks off their mobilisation. 'From the vantage-point of women's history,' writes Mary Ryan, 'the identification of a political interest of one's own was not a fall from public virtue but a step towards empowerment'²⁷ Women have typically had to shake themselves loose from submissiveness, to make themselves less rather than more self-denying, and this experience puts a more positive gloss on assertions of self or group interest.

Joan Landes notes that 'when women during the French Revolution and the nineteenth century attempted to organize in public on the basis of their interests, they risked violating the constitutive principles of the bourgeois public sphere: in place of one, they substituted the many; in place of disinterestedness, they revealed themselves to have an interest.'²⁸ The most misogynist elements of republicanism have disappeared from late twentieth century variants, and there is now little of that celebration of manly heroisms, and associated disdain for the 'mere' female, that can be observed in earlier versions. But wherever republicanism comes to celebrate disinterestedness or generality, it threatens to undercut what has been a persistent feminist concern. As Iris Young famously argued in her critique of Benjamin Barber: 'In a society where some groups are privileged while others are oppressed, insisting that as citizens persons should leave behind their particular affiliations and experiences to adopt a general point of view serves only to reinforce that privilege; for the perspectives and interests of the privileged will tend to dominate this unified public,

marginalizing or silencing those of other groups.²⁹ Premature appeals to disinterestedness or impartiality place a particularly heavy burden on groups that are just beginning to articulate their distinctive concerns, twisting assertions of need into claims of pure selfishness and reducing people to silence again.

Consider in this context Robert Putnam's analysis of civic traditions in modern Italy, which turns partly on a discussion of the personal preference vote. At the time of his analysis, Italian elections were conducted on the basis of party lists, with voters having the additional opportunity to indicate their preference between individuals. In Putnam's comparison between North and South - between regions with a strong sense of civic involvement and others where patron-client politics still prevails - he sees the use of the personal preference vote as indicating the absence of a civic community. '(I)n the least civic regions, such as Calabria, voters are brought to the polls not by issues, but by hierarchical patron-client networks'. 'More than half of the citizens in the civic regions have **never** cast a preference ballot in their lives; more than half of the voters in the less civic regions say they **always** have.'³⁰

One can see, of course, what he means. There is a difference between voting for someone who shares your political aspirations and voting for someone who knows your father or has promised you a job, and the first suggests a more vibrant and informed political culture than the second. The example recalls, however, broadly similar voting systems that operate elsewhere in Europe, where the opportunity to indicate a personal preference has been exploited by women's groups to raise the proportion of women elected. Putnam sees the 'good polity' as characterised by the citizens' engagement with public issues and corresponding lack of interest in personalities, but for anyone seeking to challenge the male monopoly on politics, this is an oversharpe dichotomy. When citizens abdicate to the party the responsibility for ranking individuals, they may be saying (in good republican fashion) that their votes are

not for purchase and their support entirely a matter of political programmes and ideas. But this lack of interest in the individual also commits them to saying they do not care whether the preferred candidate is male or female, white or black, from an over-represented majority or an under-represented minority. Feminists cannot afford to be so disdainful of 'personal' difference. Indeed, anyone concerned about the under-representation of subordinated social groups has to regard the choice of individual as an additional salient concern. Putnam's high-minded contrast between civic virtue and patron-client relations makes it harder to recognise the legitimacy of this.

This emphasis on particularity and difference opens up what may seem an impossible distance from republican thinking, but there is a further turn in the cycle that begins to close this again. Feminism has always, in some sense, been about challenging false unities: challenging the assumption that the family is a harmonious unit, that members of the same household necessarily share the same interests, or that 'man' can stand in for 'man and woman' as if the two sexes would never disagree. Because of this, feminists have proved particularly sensitive to the further differentiations that also make 'woman' a false unity: the multiple differences between women of class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and race. The fragmentation implied in this is one problem feminism has had to face. The other is that if we put too much stress on difference - on the fact that people have different experiences and different interests, and that those with one set of experiences cannot 'stand in' for those with another - we seem to legitimate a vision of politics in which no-one addresses anyone else's concerns and each just looks after her own.

If we say, for example, that men cannot be relied upon to recognise and defend women's interests (I find it hard to see how anyone could consider herself a feminist if she did not argue some version of this), are we saying men should leave so-called women's concerns

to the women and women leave men's concerns to the men? If we say that white women cannot be relied upon to recognise and act on the problems of racism, are we saying racism is only a problem for black people and does not have to be addressed by those who are white? In both cases, the first statement seems absolutely right: our different experiences do influence and constrain our understandings of the world, and we have to be very wary of unities that turn out to be false. But if the implication is that the members of one group have no responsibility towards the members of another - no capacity even for understanding their different point of view – few of us would want to pursue that road. At this point, republicanism comes back into its own, offering a more dialogic understanding of public justice and public good that can be a useful resource in addressing this issue. As many of those developing the case for deliberative democracy have argued, the very requirement of publicity – having to engage with others in public, to take on board different arguments and perspectives, to frame our own demands in terms that will be compelling to those with whom we disagree – should encourage a more transformative politics that enables everyone to move beyond our initial, more local concerns. The more ‘private’ politics of the ballot box is unlikely to have this effect.³¹

2. Dependency

The republican critique of dependency and domination also has obvious resonance with feminism, particularly as developed in Philip Pettit’s recent work. Pettit argues that the defining core of the republican tradition lies less in ideals of active political participation or the pursuit of common interest than in the notion of freedom as non-domination, and he presents a version that is far less severe in its separation of public from private concerns. On his reading, the **res publica** side of republicanism becomes less prominent. It is exposure to the arbitrary will of another that emerges as the greatest evil in the republican canon, and while most of the

classical literature has focused attention on exposure to tyrannical and unchecked rulers, there is no reason why the same concerns should not apply to the dominance of employers over workers or the dominance of husbands over wives.

Pettit draws extensively on the experiences of women to clarify why living with a kindly master is still living unfree, and in doing so, echoes what has long been a feminist concern. Women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were well aware that the chains of servitude could be wrought from silk and lace, and they rarely endorsed the argument that dependency is acceptable so long as dependants are 'allowed' to do what they want to do. Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the theorists most obviously indebted to republican thinking, and the real horror for her was not women's poverty or terrible conditions of work, but their dependency on and domination by men. So long as society attached such exaggerated weight to sexual difference (Wollstonecraft pulled no punches in identifying men as the instigators of this) then women would be unable to develop their physical strength, their moral courage, or their capacities for rational action. Criticising 'the state of degradation to which woman is reduced'³², she argued that women's senses had been inflamed and their understandings neglected. They had been encouraged to exaggerate their physical frailty rather than build their bodily strength; they were supposed to be innocent - read ignorant; to refine their taste rather than their understanding; to play off contemptible infantile airs in the attempt to excite male desire. Poorer women escaped the worst effects of femininity simply because they had to work, therefore had to be strong and capable. Some aristocratic women escaped the worst effects because they wielded economic power. But women of the middle classes had been turned into empty-headed and manipulative emblems of sexuality, encouraged to get their way through flattery and deceit, and taught to abdicate moral responsibility for their lives.

The example speaks to a strong association between feminism and republicanism in

the formative years of feminist thinking, but it also clarifies why that association later became more weak. Wollstonecraft was preoccupied with questions of dependence and independence, domination and freedom, and while she saw independence as conditional on certain social changes (mainly in the sphere of education), she had little of the later nineteenth century preoccupation with material equality as a condition for freedom. Thus, she hated aristocratic wealth, but more for its luxury, decadence, degenerative influence than for the inequalities it represented in terms of the distribution of income and wealth. And while acutely sensitive to the harsh conditions of many working women's lives, she tended to regard poorer women almost as better off than those living on higher incomes. Like many feminists trying to make sense of the peculiar patterns developing through late eighteenth/ early nineteenth century Europe, she came to believe that the caged beauties of the middle class were more dominated, degraded and infantilised than the hard-working women of the lower class. This meant, among other things, that Wollstonecraft saw poverty as less of a threat to liberty than dependency. The equality she sought was to be measured in terms of independence rather than income or positioning in the social division of labour; and she saw no intrinsic reason why men and women could not be equally independent even while assuming very different responsibilities and roles.

This is the point that has proved so troubling to later feminists, for Wollstonecraft does not seem particularly perturbed by a division of labour that allocates familial and domestic responsibilities to the women and leaves most fields of public employment to the men. Some have explained this just as an understandable failure of imagination, for who could have anticipated, at the end of the eighteenth century, that women might come to join the labour force in equal numbers with men or men take equal responsibility for their children? (Who can anticipate this even now?) But to 'excuse' her in this way is itself a

failure of imagination, for what Wollstonecraft's arguments reveal is her deep conviction that it is the capacity to think and act for yourself that matters rather than one's place in the division of labour or one's level of income and wealth. What she was saying, in effect, was that it matters less what you do than how you do it. You have to be free from the domination of others, you have to be serious not silly, you have to be governing yourself. But if these conditions are once met, then a woman running her household and bringing up her children can be as free and worthy of respect as anyone running the country or earning vast monies in the more public world of work. Indeed, for the middle class women Wollstonecraft saw as aping the life-styles of the aristocracy - refusing to breast-feed or educate their children, refusing to soil their hands on domestic labour or turn their minds to the management of their home - the resumption of domestic and family responsibilities would be the real saving of their souls.

There is a strand of contemporary feminism that works to reclaim the value of mothering and therefore sounds rather similar to this. But for most of the twentieth century, Wollstonecraft's perception that independence and self-respect come more from how you live your life than from what that life consists in has been out of tune with the dominant concerns. Through this century, it is the stark material inequalities between women and men that have captured most attention: the poverty and malnutrition of women struggling to feed their children on whatever their husbands passed on from their breadwinners' wage; the persistent gap between average male and average female earnings; the impossibly long hours women worked at their domestic tasks even when they also went out to work. Sometimes the campaign focus has been on what we have come to term 'equality' issues: winning the right to the same kind of education as boys; ending the discriminatory practices that continued to keep women out of better paid jobs and professions; battling for equality of pay. Sometimes the

focus has been more on what we call 'difference' issues: working to improve the health of mothers and children; to expand nursery provision; to secure women from the violence of men. It is not that dependency has become less of an issue for twentieth century feminists, but that the battle against this dependency has come to centre more decisively on social and economic reform. It has also increasingly invoked visions of strict equality.

To be independent is, as Wollstonecraft believed, a matter of how you view yourself and how you are viewed by others. But the idea that you can achieve this recognition while continuing to occupy what was traditionally a subordinate female zone has come to seem deeply implausible. There are, of course, many differences that are compatible with equality: it should not be necessary for us all to share the same religious or political beliefs in order to be recognised as equals; it should not be necessary for us to enjoy the same music or eat the same food; and it certainly should not be necessary for us to demonstrate the same athletic or academic capabilities. But where difference has been so long overlaid with inequality – as in the different responsibilities so long allocated to women and men – it is hard to put one's confidence in a scenario that promises full equality and independence yet leaves us attached to different spheres of activity. The point here is that feminist analysis of women's subordination has been profoundly influenced by the materialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the more comprehensive egalitarianism that developed out of this. This may not be intrinsically at odds with republican thinking, but where republicanism focuses attention on the political framework within which we can challenge domination, feminism is more likely to emphasise the background inequalities that contribute to this.³³

3 The public sphere

On the face of it, republican appeals to a revitalised public might seem to have the least to say to feminist politics, but such a view would misread decades of women's campaigning for access to

the public realm. Feminists have been fiercely critical, of course, of the stark separation between public and private, and the disparagement of the domestic and familial so often associated with this. Through much of the last two centuries, however, access to the public sphere has been one of the defining demands of the women's movement, and women have felt acutely their loss of a public life. One of the ironies, as Mary Ryan³⁴ points out, is that women's eventual incursions into the public turned out to coincide with a period widely regarded as one of decline (a typical experience for women, who often find themselves gaining access to jobs or institutions just at the moment when these lose their power). But however critical feminists have been of the elevation of public over private, most have continued to view participation in public life as a key constituent of human freedom. This has always been a point of contact with republican thinking.

The point of dissension is that republicanism still operates with an oversharpest dichotomy between public and private; this is also true of that wider body of literature that addresses the seeming decline of the public sphere. The issue here is conceptual as well as practical, for the allocation of men to the public and women to the private is in large part a conceptual move. It is not just that women turn out to occupy one corner of society while men occupy another; it is also – and nowadays perhaps more so – that the activities associated with women have been treated, almost by definition, as private. Women have then faced both practical and definitional exclusion: a practical exclusion that can be measured in their lesser participation in the labour market or world of politics; and a definitional exclusion that operates through categorising what they do as less political.

This is one of the themes Bonnie Honig develops in her discussion of Hannah Arendt. Arendt's 'rigid and uncompromising public/private distinction'³⁵ was itself a political act: Arendt saw public life as threatened by the deadening intrusion of the body (with all its self-

evident, and therefore to her, politically uninteresting needs) and she deployed the distinction between public and private partly as a way of protecting the sphere of political action. The distinction is then far from innocent, for when that-which-has-to-be-excluded overlaps so closely with women's lives, it begins to figure as one of the mechanisms for keeping women in their place. Armed with this insight (part of what was meant by 'the personal is political'), feminists have queried the narrow definitions of the public sphere they find in the writings of republicans and their near allies. One consequence is that they are less impressed by evidence of a process of substantive decline.

Thus Seyla Benhabib takes Arendt to task for trying to define the public sphere in relation to certain types of activity, and argues that any matter can enter public space once it becomes matter of public dispute³⁶. On this analysis, it would make no sense to cite the changing subject-matter of political debate (from heroic deeds to economic needs, or even to the division of housework between women and men) as evidence that public life is on the decline. In similar vein, Nancy Fraser argues that it is misleading to talk of 'the' public sphere – conjuring up as this does images of a parliamentary chamber – and more illuminating to refer to a multiplicity of publics, organised around different networks of public communication.³⁷ On this analysis, we could not cite citizen apathy on national issues as decisive evidence of decline, for this might well coincide with a bustling proliferation of 'counterpublics' each energetically debating alternatives. The feminist critique of the public/private distinction generates a far more plural and decentred understanding of what constitutes public life, and this undercuts some of the more damning analyses of political decline.

Positions on this are subtle: a jaundiced observer might even charge them with inconsistency. Anyone engaging with the literature on the public sphere does so out of

dissatisfaction with a model of politics that presents it as the protection of individual freedoms or promotion of individual interests, and most of those engaging with this literature would say there is a deficiency, even a crisis, in contemporary public life. Many feminists share this perception, even if they are more commonly found debating Habermas or the relevance of deliberative democracy than engaging with republicanism per se. But feminists have also wanted to contest the rigid distinction between public and private that defines so much characteristically ‘female’ activity as non-political and leaves so much of what we call ‘women’s issues’ outside the scope of public life. So where others might look back nostalgically to a high point of public interaction, feminists are more prone to point out that the great moments in the history of the public sphere were themselves moments of female exclusion; and where others might bemoan the growth of either interest or identity politics, feminists are more likely to query the assumption that these are antithetical to the public good. Feminists have noted stirrings of political activity in unexpected places – in some cases, even underground³⁸ - and while this sometimes leads to an over-sanguine reading of contemporary politics, it is an important corrective to the more doomsday scenarios that project a process of historical decline.

Conclusion

All this adds up to a perception of republicanism as an uneasy ally. When the tradition was born out of such resolutely masculine origins, this is hardly a surprising finding. The fact that feminists have simultaneously found much to admire and much to condemn is also unsurprising, for there is no pre-feminist tradition of political thought that can be adopted wholesale as a basis for sexual politics. That republicanism nonetheless attracts increasing feminist interest testifies, as much as anything, to the search for an alternative to the liberal tradition. Feminism is very much a child of liberalism: informed by a similar critique of

ascribed positions and traditional hierarchies, a similar commitment to individual autonomy, a similar belief that humans are born equal whatever the other characteristics of their lives. But that liberal tradition developed for too long as an exclusively masculine preserve, and the assumptions that came to be built into it have disturbed generations of feminist activists. For much of the twentieth century, feminists sought to moderate the excesses of liberalism by welding onto it some elements of socialist thinking; now that socialism is itself in disarray, republicanism looks a more likely ally.

Liberalism is associated with the view that society is divided between many competing interests and that each has to look after its own. Socialism is associated with the view that solidarity comes from shared interests, and that these are overwhelmingly the shared interests of class. The summaries are too simplistic, but if these are the alternatives on offer, it is easy to understand why republicanism has come back into favour. Despite the problems I have indicated (downplaying genuine conflicts of interest, failing to recognise the empowerment attached to articulating distinct and separate concerns, focusing on the political, often to the exclusion of the social and economic, and idealising a once lively public that was never very lively for women), this is a tradition that offers a different way of conceiving the relationship between self and others, and a different way of thinking about public life. Any attempt to swallow it wholesale would be seriously mistaken (difficult, anyway, given that 'it' varies significantly in its current incarnations). But in that tension between insisting that different groups do have distinct and different interests and nonetheless projecting a vision of politics as something more than looking after yourself, a sufficiently cagey appropriation of republicanism offers one possible resource.

Notes

¹ This paper was originally written for a conference on 'The Historical Perspectives of Republicanism and the Future of the European Union', held in Siena in September, 1998. I am grateful to the participants at that conference for their comments on the first draft.

2. Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981)

3. Mary Dietz 'On Arendt', in **Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory**, eds. M. L. Shanley and C. Pateman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p 250.

4. Bonnie Honig (ed) **Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt** (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995)

5. Writing of Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, Virginia Sapiro argues that 'her works from the 1790s are at least as infused with a language of republicanism as of legal rights'. Sapiro, **A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.xx See also Judith A. Vega 'Feminist Republicanism, Etta Palm-Aelders on justice, virtue and men' in **History of European Ideas**, special issue on Women and the French Revolution 10/3 (1989)

6. Mary Dietz 'Context Is All: Feminism and Theories of Citizenship', **Daedalus**, 116/4, (1987)

⁷ Rian Voet 'Political Representation and Quotas: Hanna Pitkin's Concept(s) of Representation in the Context of Feminist Politics' **Acta Politica** 27/4 (1992); also 'Women as Citizens: A Feminist Debate' **Australian Feminist Studies** 19 (1994)

8. Though she does not draw explicitly on the republican tradition, this is a central argument in Jean Bethke Elshtain, **Democracy on Trial** (New York: Basic Books, 1995)

⁹ J. Landes (ed) **Feminism, the Public and the Private** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

¹⁰ See essays in J.Meehan (ed) **Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse** (New York: Routledge, 1995); Nancy Fraser ‘What’s critical about critical theory? The case of Habermas and gender’ in **Unruly Practices** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); and essays in Joan Landes (ed) **Feminism, the Public and the Private** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998);

¹¹ See Seyla Benhabib (ed) **Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political** (Princeton N.J.:Princeton University Press, 1996); and Iris Marion Young’s forthcoming **Inclusion and Democracy**.

¹² J.G.A Pocock **The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Quentin Skinner **Machiavelli** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Quentin Skinner ‘The Italian city-republics’ **Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508BC to AD1993** ed. J.Dunn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

¹³ In the first edition of **Models of Democracy** David Held jumps rather rapidly from the Greek city states to the birth of liberalism in seventeenth century Europe. In the second edition, published in 1992, he includes a new chapter on republicanism as one of the classic models of democracy. David Held **Models of Democracy** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996) ch2.

14.Hannah Arendt **The Origins of Totalitarianism** (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961) p. xxix

15. Hannah Arendt **On Revolution** (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) p. 54
16. Arendt **On Revolution**, p.220
17. Arendt **On Revolution**, p.221
18. J.G.A.Pocock **The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition** (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), p.550
19. Sheldon Wolin **Politics and Vision** (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960)
20. Michael Sandel **Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy** (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996)
21. Benjamin Barber **Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age** ((University of California Press, 1984)
22. Philip Pettit **Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Quentin Skinner **Liberty Before Liberalism** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- ²³ Richard Sennett **The Fall of Public Man** (New York: Vintage Books, 1978)
- ²⁴ This has been a major theme in Michael Sandel's work; See 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self' **Political Theory** 12 (1984)
- ²⁵ Eg. Carol Gilligan **In a Different Voice** (Cambridge,MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Joan Tronto **Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethics of Care** (New York: Routledge, 1993) ;Virginia Held (ed) **Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist**

Ethics (Boulder; Westview Press, 1995)

²⁶ Eg. Carole Pateman **The Disorder of Women** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989) Anne Phillips **Engendering Democracy** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Ruth Lister **Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives** (London: Macmillan, 1997)

²⁷ Mary P Ryan 'Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth Century America' , **Feminism, the Public and the Private** ed. J. Landes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 219

28. Joan B.Landes 'The Public and Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration', **Feminism the Public and the Private** ed. J. Landes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998),p.143

29.Iris M.Young 'Polity and group difference: a critique of the ideal of universal citizenship' **Ethics**, 99 (1989) p.257

30.Robert D. Putnam (with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti) **Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy** (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993) p.97

³¹ I develop this argument more fully in 'The Politicisation of Difference: Does This Make for a More Tolerant Society?' In **Toleration, Identity and Difference** eds John Horton and Susan Mendus (London; Macmillan, 1998)

³² This is a chapter title from Mary Wollstonecraft **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**, first published in 1790.

³³ For a further development of this argument, see Anne Phillips **Which Equalities Matter?** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999)

34. Ryan 'Gender and Public Access', pp.198-9

³⁵ Bonnie Honig 'Towards an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity' **Feminists Theorize the Political** ed. J. Butler and J.W.Scott (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 215

³⁶ Seyla Benhabib 'Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jurgen Habermas' **Feminism, the Public and the Private** ed. J.Landes

³⁷ Nancy Fraser 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' **Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "PostSocialist" Condition** (New York and London: Routledge, 1997)

³⁸ In 'Towards an Agonistic Feminism', Bonnie Honig suggests an analogy between feminist subversion and the underground networks of occupied France.