

OF SEXISM IN POLITICAL THEORY

Carole Pateman

Lorenne M.C. Clark and Lynda Lange, eds., *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory: Women and Reproduction from Plato to Nietzsche*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979.

Some of the most original and exciting work in political theory is currently being undertaken by feminists. Old questions are being discussed from a new perspective, new questions are being raised and the classic texts reexamined. The essays in *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory* — which cover Plato, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche — provide a good example of this critical textual reinterpretation. The theorists who appear in the conventional pantheon of “traditional political theory” are, of course, all male. More importantly, as the feminist reassessment of their arguments shows, they are also almost all male supremacists. The standard commentaries and textbooks have invariably ignored this aspect of the classics, regarding it as entirely unremarkable. The very few exceptions to what O’Brien in this volume calls “male-stream thought” are usually ignored too, typified by most commentators’ refusal to admit that J.S. Mill wrote *The Subjection of Women* or that it is virtually a companion volume to his “acceptable” work *On Liberty*. Occasionally, male writers are stung into reactions like Bloom’s comment about Book V of *The Republic* showing “contempt for convention and nature, [and] wounding of all the dearest sensibilities of masculine pride and shame, the family and statesmanship”. Until the present revival of the women’s movement made its influence felt in academia the separation in political theory of citizenship and political life from “private” domestic life and the world of women was virtually absolute.

The chapters of *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory* show in detail how the classic writers base their sexist arguments on appeals to the “natural” differences in attributes and moral characters of men and women and, most fundamentally, to the different roles of the sexes in reproduction (including childrearing). These differences (usually reasonably soberly presented, though there are examples of more or less pathological misogyny as in Schopenhauer’s *Aphorisms*) are held necessarily to lead to the division of social life into two “separate spheres”; the “feminine” sphere of domestic life and reproduction, and the “masculine” public or political sphere of production and the state. Although women have now been admitted as citizens in Western countries, the belief is still widespread that they are “naturally” not fitted for political life. The task of uncovering the different

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ways in which this belief has helped structure the great works of political theory is therefore of more than academic interest. It is crucial to an understanding of the present social basis of women's oppression — which in some of its most important aspects is really “the wife question” — and thus to the struggle for change. However, now that books and essays are appearing that analyse the arguments of the classics about women in the context of the theories as a whole, it is also becoming clear that the relationship of feminist theorists to the classic texts is neither straightforward nor unproblematic. The question raised by the new scholarship is what, if anything, traditional political theory can contribute to the development of an explicitly feminist political theory. If the mainstream of our theoretical past is sexist through and through, what relevance has it to feminists?

In her excellent study *Women in Western Political Thought* (also published in 1979), Susan Okin concludes that

it is by no means a simple matter to integrate the female half of the human race into a tradition of political theory which has . . . defined them, and intrafamilial relationships, as outside the scope of the political.

More emphatically, at the end of the “Introduction” to *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory* the editors write that they hope that the book will show “ample reason for concluding that traditional political theory is utterly bankrupt in the light of present [feminist] perspectives”. They conclude by calling for “new theories”. If we are faced by a bankrupt past then it would seem to follow that feminist theorists must totally reject this theoretical heritage. But how many of us feel able to tackle the task that would confront us if nothing of traditional theory can be salvaged: how many of us possess the intellectual capacity or originality that a completely new start demands? Indeed, does it make sense to ask for an entirely new start? Happily, neither the “Introduction” nor the other essays give us sufficient reason to draw this daunting conclusion.

Clark and Lange refer to “the first major break with the tradition” that, they argue, occurs in the theories of Marx and Engels. In “Reproducing Marxist Man”, O'Brien suggests that, notwithstanding the fact that Marx has his theoretical feet firmly in the “male-stream”, his methodology provides necessary tools for the development of feminist theory. But, if Marx is useful, or essential, in the formulation of feminist political theory, then it must be asked whether other theorists, albeit also sexist, may not have something to contribute too. In other words, rather than (very unrealistically) rejecting all the past as “utterly bankrupt”, feminist theorists should be considering the criteria to be used to decide where starting points, insights or methods can be

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found. Moreover, unless Marx is the only theorist to whom feminists can refer, and he is thus placed outside "traditional political theory", the notion of that "tradition" must be examined rather more closely than is sometimes the case in feminist critiques. For example, if Marx's position in the tradition appears ambiguous, how is J.S. Mill to be classified? He can hardly be excluded from "traditional political theory" but he did write *The Subjection of Women* in which he explicitly criticises the argument for women's "nature". This suggests that sexism or criticism of sexism is only one, though a crucial, issue in feminist political theory. Nor is this at all surprising. It is true that the same assumptions about women's nature and proper social place recur across the centuries but the assumptions are embedded in very different theoretical perspectives which, in turn, form part of historically specific forms of social life. If the "development of an adequate theory of the relation between production and reproduction" is, as the editors state, central to feminist political theory, certain theoretical perspectives will be a good deal more useful than others; some theories may, strictly, be irrelevant.

I would suggest that the latter is true of pre-modern theories. Recent work on Plato reveals wide disagreement whether his arguments are, or are not, feminist. Lange in "The Function of Equal Education in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*", argues that his position "cannot properly be understood as feminist", but she also states that Plato's "theoretical concerns are ultimately not those of feminism". The last comment raises the fundamental question of what is involved if feminism is to be a theoretical issue. What is necessary for feminist questions to be raised from within a particular theorist's work, even if he is a male supremacist? It seems to me that it is not until the modern period, until "individuals" begin to be seen as beings who are "naturally" free and equal, and social life as a whole is conceived as grounded in convention, that the "theoretical concerns of feminism" become possible and can be raised in a *general* or *universal* fashion (rather than finding isolated examples of fascinating speculation about different social and sexual arrangements). If this is so, the problem then becomes one of deciding which of the modern members of the tradition have most to offer feminist political theorists. The character of the problem tends to get lost beneath the fact that "individuals" are conventionally regarded as male. In the "Introduction" Bentham and Marx are distinguished from Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke and Hegel on the grounds that the former do not necessarily take the term "citizen" or "man" (or, I add, "individual") to be extensionally male. However, the principles of most (radical) modern theories are presented as universal. Whether or not a particular theorist actually extends them to women is only part of the problem (neither Bentham nor Marx, nor J.S. Mill, are completely outside the "male-stream"). An equally important question for feminists is whether a particular theorist's work could be used in the positive task of developing new, feminist theory, for largely critical purposes — or not at all.

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Hume's empiricist utilitarianism, for example, appears to be "utterly bankrupt". Louise Marcell-Lacoste shows that to follow "Hume's Method in Moral Reasoning" is to provide a "philosophical justification of sexist discrimination". The allegedly natural character of women — and Hume's version is spelled out by Steven Burns in the first part of the chapter — can only be presented as a fact of life; women's social position can never be seen as a moral and political problem. On the other hand, other essays illustrate how critical feminist questions can be raised from within a theorist's arguments, although this occasionally tends to be obscured by an author's zeal to reveal the full extent of sexism. For instance, Clark's very helpful discussion of "Women and Locke" draws out the implications for women and reproduction of Locke's justification of the appropriation and inheritance, by men, of private property. However, she weakens her argument by asserting that Locke's theory "is, in the end, far more objectionable than that of Filmer". Locke may not have extended his attack on patriarchal theory to conjugal relations, but his individualist contract theory, and its significance for the development of feminism, puts him on the outer side of a theoretical and historical divide from Sir Robert Filmer's divinely ordained and all-encompassing patriarchalism. Locke's contract theory allows the question of women's status as individuals to be raised; indeed, Locke, and his patriarchal opponents, are aware that individualism makes this question impossible to avoid, if not to suppress. The origin of feminism, like that of other modern radical, critical theories, is bound up with the development of individualism but, again like other critical theories, if feminism is to be more than merely critical (or do more than demand equal rights within the liberal capitalist social structure) it has to transcend and transform its abstractly individualist heritage. That is to say, if there are to be new theoretical advances by feminists, the theorists who cannot be ignored are those who attempt to go beyond abstract individualism while extending (in principle) concrete, social freedom to all individuals. These include Marx, of course — who "broke" with the "tradition" that the once revolutionary liberal, abstract individualism had become by the mid-nineteenth century — but it also, very importantly, includes the blatantly male supremacist Rousseau and Hegel.

Both these theorists emphasise the distinctiveness of the domestic and political spheres while basing their theories on the necessary inter-relationships among different dimensions of social life. Such a theoretical project is essential to feminist critiques of the separation of reproduction and production, of personal and political life. In her essay on "Rousseau: Women and the General Will", Lange remarks that "it appears that a truly egalitarian political theory, . . . must include a philosophy of synthesis or harmony of reason and appetite not one of their opposition". Rousseau and Hegel claim to provide such a philosophy, but even though this claim will be rejected by feminists, feminist theorists share a similar goal. There is a profound sense in

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which the oppositions, antimonies or separations which structure liberal theory and liberal-capitalist practice are ultimately different ways of expressing the most general opposition and separation; that between the particular and universal. This antimony is exemplified in popular consciousness in the opposition between male and female ("male" stands for universal, political, public, production, reason, philosophy; "female" for particular, private, personal, reproduction, feeling, appetite). A new feminist theory has thus to tackle not only sexism but the most fundamental and complex problems of philosophy and political theory.

Feminist theory is subject to two reductionist temptations: one is the Marxist temptation to reduce feminism to the problem of class; the other is the radical feminist temptation to reduce all social subordination to a biological opposition between male and female. The theoretical complexities of a Rousseau or Hegel provide a protection against temptation. In an excellent discussion of "Hegel and 'The Women Question'", Patricia Jagentowicz Mills shows, for the first time to this reviewer's knowledge, how Hegel's commentators have failed to see that his "universal" is merely partial. Hegel's universal "is necessarily male and male is *not* universal". But Mills also reminds us that although "neither the family nor woman's oppression can be understood apart from an analysis of capitalism" we cannot simply apply the categories of political economy to the domestic sphere; the specificity of Hegel's three spheres of family, civil society and state must be maintained. The difficulty of doing this is illustrated in the "Introduction" where it is argued that the legal structuring of the family derives from the middle class need to secure inheritance, so that the working class family has less need of legal marriage and its function is essentially reproductive. Cheap reproductive labour ensures the supply of cheap productive labour. This argument is too simple and mechanical in its association of one class with reproduction. Our socio-economic system is, and always has been, patriarchal-capitalist (and it may now be the case that the need for cheap labour has been considerably, and permanently, reduced; the demand for the contemporary equivalent of cannon-fodder seems to be holding however); the consolidation of capitalist social relations depended not only on the inculcation of factory discipline, but also on bourgeois patterns of legal and moral family relations becoming accepted by the bulk of the population.

Another illustration of the difficulty of maintaining the specificity of different dimensions of social life can be found in O'Brien's lively essay on Marx (which includes a discussion of an early work of Hegel's on reproduction which complements Mills' argument). O'Brien points out that "birth is not an object of philosophy" either for the young Marx who thought that the idea of creation led to nonsensical questions about the "original" creation of humankind, or for the older Marx who saw sexuality as merely immediate or contingent. However, O'Brien tends to fall into the radical

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feminist temptation. She argues, ingeniously, that the origins of the gender struggle lie in the alienation of male sperm in copulation. Men cooperate to “annul the alienation of the seed” through the social fact of paternity, established through the domination of women and the appropriation of children. But how then can the subordination of female to male be ended? The proletariat overthrow the bourgeoisie by abolishing capitalism, and thus abolishing the “proletarian” and “bourgeois” classes — but the feminist revolution can hardly follow the radical feminist analogue of the class struggle. “Masculine” and “feminine”, like “bourgeois” and “proletariat” are social and historical constructs, but male and female are not. If the basis of the gender struggle lies in the “alienation” of male seed in heterosexual copulation, the only solution is radical feminist separatism — or the elimination of males. I should add that writers in this volume are not advocating either course.

One rather murky aspect of male supremacist theory that is not much discussed is the extent to which it rests on a fear and envy of women, more specifically of their sexuality and ability to give birth. This is touched on in Christine Garside Allen’s chapter on “Nietzsche’s Ambivalence About Women”, which also provides the first comprehensive account of Nietzsche’s views on women. He saw women as “naturally” slavish and as “naturally” Dionysian. However, they are lesser Dionysians who will bear the supermen. Nietzsche explicitly and frequently used the metaphor of motherhood, but claimed that only men could be philosophical and spiritual mothers. He also reserved some of his most bitterly misogynist comments for educated feminists, but he was personally attracted to intellectual women, including Lou Salomé. Allen suggests that if they had formed a lasting relationship his theoretical development might have been different. Perhaps. But, on Allen’s own account, the role that Nietzsche saw for Salomé exemplifies the only place, as Michele Le Doeuff has pointed out (*Radical Philosophy*, 1977), that educated women are allotted by philosophers. Allen says that Nietzsche saw Salomé as a “disciple”, and he wrote to her that “I very much wished that I might be your *teacher*”. Only if women confine themselves to being disciples as practical underlabourers, who provide a necessary constraint on the flights of general theoretical fancy of their masters, do they pose no threat to reason or philosophy. This is exactly the role that J.S. Mill gives to philosopher’s wives in the *Subjection*, although Allen cites Mill and Taylor in this context.

The Sexism of Social and Political Theory is a very stimulating collection which may well be disregarded by the contemporary successors to the classic male supremacists who should give it careful attention. There is a bibliography of recent feminist, and related, theory for those who wish to take these questions further. Two final reflections. First, at various points in the book it seems more confusing than a help to stretch the term “reproduction” to include child-rearing as well as child-bearing. Second, although I have

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argued that feminist theorists should not turn their backs on “traditional theory” this is not their only source of assistance and insight. The practice of the women’s movement, in particular the attempts at anti-hierarchical organisation and the stress on mutual aid and solidarity, has its own implicit theory and if feminist theorists forget this they will merely continue to perpetuate the present separation of intellectuals from everyday life.

Reader in Government
University of Sydney
