
Feminism,
the Public
and the
Private

LANDES

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OXFORD READINGS IN FEMINISM

Feminism, the Public and the Private

Edited by

Joan B. Landes

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OXFORD READINGS IN FEMINISM

FEMINISM, THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE

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Introduction

Joan B. Landes

Claiming that 'the personal is political', second-wave feminists boldly challenged the myths supporting conventional notions of the family and personal life.¹ Far from being a platform for personal fulfilment, in feminist writings the private sphere first figured as a site of sexual inequality, unremunerated work, and seething discontent. In Betty Friedan's evocative formulation, the housewife—the ideal woman of the post-Second World War years in the United States and other advanced industrial societies—suffered silently from a 'problem that has no name'.² Housewives, however, were only the tip of the iceberg. Students and civil rights activists, married and single women, heterosexuals and lesbians joined the ranks of a resurgent feminist movement which began to name the problems accompanying woman's multiple roles as wife, mother, sexual companion, worker, and political subject. Feminism offered women a public language for their private despair. Consciousness-raising groups and feminist organizations provided women with a route out of private isolation and into public activism. In the burgeoning field of feminist theory accompanying this new phase of activism, the problem of sexual subordination came to be linked closely to the division of public and private life. Breaking the silences of personal life, feminists sought the grounds for a more egalitarian private and public sphere. This last point bears repeating. Whereas it is commonly assumed that feminists, like women, are preoccupied with personal life, feminism's contribution to the theory and practice of a more robust, democratic public sphere is sometimes overlooked. As the slogan 'The Personal Is Political' attests, a feminist movement moves in two directions, placing the gendered organization of both public and private space at centre stage.

Feminists did not invent the vocabulary of public and private, which in ordinary language and political tradition have been intimately linked. The term 'public' suggests the opposite of 'private':

that which pertains to the people as a whole, the community, the common good, things open to sight, and those things that are accessible and shared by all. Conversely, 'the private' signifies something closed and exclusive, as in the admonition 'Private property—no trespassing'. The opposition between public and private is a distinguishing feature of both liberal and republican political argument, yet they offer practically opposing assessments of these two core terms. Liberals associate privacy with freedom: they value the private sphere and defend the individual's right to privacy against interference by other persons or the state. In contrast, republicans regard the private, which they associate with the body and its needs, as pertaining to those things that ought to be hidden from view. In turn, they associate the public with freedom, or acting in concert with others on behalf of the common good.

Feminism does not map comfortably onto either of these traditions, though, like republicans, feminists value public participation and, like liberals, they see the need to expand the contents of personal freedom. However, by focusing political attention on the private sphere feminists have challenged the effects of keeping the body and things sexual hidden from view; and they have denied that inherited views of freedom have applied equally to all people or to all aspects of the person. Does liberty, feminists ask, require that we sacrifice emotions to reason or domestic matters to public affairs? Feminism has therefore upset the firm divisions between public and private matters, which both liberals and republicans in their way maintain. Both theory and history have had a role to play in shaping new feminist understandings. Historians have exposed the changing, gendered contents of public and private life. By engaging with critical theory, structuralist, and post-structuralist arguments, theorists have explored the gendered construction of individual and social identity. In short, among modern oppositional movements, feminism is unrivalled in its contribution to a deepening understanding of the historical, symbolic, and practical effects of the organization of public and private life. The selections in this volume represent the exciting range of dialogue opened by feminist theorists on these topics. They are multi-disciplinary in scope, and they reflect the historical and cross-cultural orientations of feminist scholarship over the past several decades.

In comparison to the intense questioning of private life characteristic of the late 1960s and 1970s, repeated reference to the private in the public discourse of the 1990s might almost seem like

the 'return of the repressed'. As before, critics and defenders of the body, the family, and the (gendered) person contest for public space. Yet across the political spectrum there is a heightened attention to privacy issues. This is not a simple case of the turning of the wheel. Indeed, many who protest vehemently on behalf of the individual are the first to advocate the use of state power to regulate the individual body and to restrict personal freedom. In this atmosphere, feminists have become ever more mindful of the need to safeguard personal identity and the body, while re-valuing the sphere of privacy. This has not meant an abandonment of the political in favour of the private or the forfeiture of a critical perspective on private life, the *sine qua non* of second-wave feminism. Rather, feminists have shown how the line between public and private is constantly being renegotiated. The most adamant defence of the private, Seyla Benhabib observes, necessarily involves bringing 'private matters' to public light. Calling attention to the mutual imbrication of public and private life, feminist theorists appreciate that lines between public and private life have been drawn and will continue to be drawn. However, the very act of description involves power. As Nancy Fraser points out, 'not everyone stands in the same relation to privacy and publicity; some have more power than others to draw and defend the line.'

Feminist theorists want to know whether the public/private distinction is universal, how it has emerged with singular force in certain times and places, and, not least, what accounts for the stability and instability of the boundaries that separate these regions of social life. A further complexity concerns the essentializing impulse of so much of what passes for a public discourse on public and private matters. As the readings in this volume attest, the public/private distinction provides a valuable lens through which to view issues of gender identity, on the one hand, and feminist politics, on the other.

I. THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DISTINCTION IN FEMINIST THEORY

Feminists have always vacillated between optimism about the opportunities for social change and despair over the stubborn fact of female subordination. They have debated whether or not women's subordination is a universal feature of all human society

or a product of specific historical circumstances. In her essay 'Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?' Sherry Ortner puts the case for universal oppression in the starkest possible terms, but she locates its source not in biology but in the symbolic organization of human culture. Drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir and Claude Lévi-Strauss, Ortner posits that women are everywhere more associated with nature than culture, with activities that are more immanent, unmediated, and embedded in things. In contrast, men's relationships are more transcendent and transformative of persons and objects. Agreeing with Michelle Rosaldo and others who see a public/domestic split in all human societies, Ortner links women's association with the domestic context to their identification with a lower order of social and cultural organization.³ Even women's equality in the institutions of public and private life will not resolve the problem of universal social devaluation, unless the ambivalent symbolic structures of gender are somehow dislodged.

Yet not all feminists were committed to a critique of the private sphere or to altering inherited gender patterns. By the early 1980s, 'pro-family' feminists began to defend women's role as mothers as the necessary basis for gender identity and feminist political consciousness. Pro-family feminists also sought to protect the private world of the family and personal life from all political intrusion, whether from meddlesome state policies or feminist politicization of the personal sphere. Focusing on the work of Jean Bethke Elshtain, Mary G. Dietz objects to such a maternalist vision of democratic political action or feminist political discourse. Dietz argues that democratic citizenship is constituted by the distinctive political bond between equal citizens, rather than by the exclusive and decidedly unequal relationship, even if benign or loving, between a mother and her child. Furthermore, Dietz charges maternalist feminists with committing the error of dividing the world 'naturally and abstractly into dual realms', with which they fault their liberal opponents. Thus, Elshtain posits a spurious choice between a virtuous private and an arrogant public existence. Dietz regards such notions as politically barren, and fruitless for interpreting the historical scope of women's public actions. It is not the superiority of one realm over the other but the nature of political action that decides the character of democratic politics. Even when women are motivated to act in public because of their position as mothers, what counts is how they act to transform their private concerns into public matters in concert with others.

Dietz calls for a feminist political theory that does not conflate democratic public life either with bureaucratic statist politics or with the values of intimacy. Her arguments set the stage for the continuing feminist engagement with the writings of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, leading theorists of the public sphere, beginning in the 1980s down to the present day. Habermas's emphasis on accessibility, openness, democratic publicity, and equality seemed a congenial starting-point for an orientation to a non-state-dominated sphere of public life, as was Arendt's perspective on equality, freedom, and novelty in political life. In contrasting ways, both philosophers addressed the split between public and private life in modern society so central to feminist analysis. Neither, however, fully confronted the exclusion of women from public life, or queried the operations of gender difference. Yet there does exist now a lively appreciation of the category of the public sphere for feminist theory, and the latter has proved enormously productive for feminist investigations in and across numerous fields—including history, philosophy, literature, sociology, media and cultural studies. The contrasting selections by Benhabib and Honig foreground many of the arguments that animate the critical appropriation by feminists of liberal and democratic theories in later sections of this collection.

Seyla Benhabib compares the agonistic, legalistic, and discursive models of public space in the writings of Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, and the liberal tradition. Against liberal formalism, she upholds Arendt's view of both the agonistic and associational dimensions of political action. However, Benhabib objects to the rigid, gendered boundary established by Arendt between the public and the private, and to the masculinist and class implications of Arendt's version of agonistic public space. Similarly, she worries that oppositions between justice and the good life or public norms and private values in Habermas's model of discursive politics operate to reinstate the public/private boundary that has led to the exclusion of women and their point of view from moral theory. Benhabib argues that a theory of the public sphere (or universalist morality) must take account of difference—especially the differences in the experiences of male and female subjects in all domains of life. She finds the possibility of the democratization of the private as well as the public arena within a reconstructed, feminist version of Habermas's discourse model of publicity. In place of Habermas's universal public, Benhabib advocates alternative publics. She would bring the realm of moral emotions and

everyday moral interactions with concrete others into the domain of moral argument. While challenging traditionalist understandings of the public/private split, Benhabib still insists that a feminist project for the democratization of public and private does not obviate the need for some distinction between the private and the public. The discourse model is based upon a strong assumption of individual autonomy and consent.

Bonnie Honig is also concerned to enhance the possibilities for individuality, though she disputes any version of feminism that is based on a stable, expressive identity for women. She also turns to Arendt, but not from the perspective of discourse politics. Rather, Honig regards Arendt as a theorist of agonistic and performative action who offers feminists a way of engaging with 'entrenched distinctions between a public and a private realm'. Agonistic feminist politics struggles 'to achieve and enable individuation by interrupting conventional practices of sex/gender and decentring the would-be primacy of conventional sex/gender binaries'. From Honig's feminist/postmodernist perspective, 'nothing is ontologically protected from politicization'—neither the binary dichotomy separating political space into public and private zones nor even the prevailing constructions of sex and gender that similarly bind gender identities in binary form. In sum, the selections in Part I pose the question of what effect a feminist politics will have on the shape and content of gender identities, on the one hand, or public/private divisions, on the other. Furthermore, does feminism itself draw upon established female identities, or does it release women from the constraints of pre-existing definitions of woman? How in any case have such definitions of gender come to coexist with the shape and content of public and private life?

II. GENDER IN THE MODERN LIBERAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The gendered organization of public and private space is re-examined in an historical framework in the selections composing Part II. Drawing on examples from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, feminist scholars take up theoretical and political questions concerning the public sphere and female publicity, space and sexuality, identity and action, and gender and citizenship in France, Britain, the United States, and Australia. Although there is no one model of public space and public speech that has won

feminist allegiance, feminists have devoted considerable attention to the category of the public sphere. As already suggested, Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere has been an especially fruitful point of departure for many feminists. My own essay surveys many of the questions opened by a critical feminist engagement with his work, from the standpoint of the gendered development of public and private life in eighteenth-century France. I contend that Habermas's idealized model of the universal public fails to account for the ways in which a system of (Western) cultural representation eclipsed women's interests in the private domain and aligned femininity with particularity, interest, and partiality. Consequently, 'he misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal.' Therefore, I argue for a more robust and embodied concept of the subject, and suggest that Habermas's discourse model of politics be supplemented with accounts of non-verbal and non-textual forms of representation in a variety of (non-print) media. Similarly, Arendt's view of the public sphere as generating a 'space of appearances' may shed light on the way in which men achieved a new form of political embodiment through action within the French revolutionary public sphere. However, Arendt ignores the way in which women—and their bodies—were simultaneously excluded from public participation and rights. I conclude that a democratic and feminist reconstruction of public-sphere theory needs to take account of the gendered construction of embodied subjectivities within both public and private life.

Leonore Davidoff also addresses the association of masculine and feminine identities with the institutional development of separate spheres, while appreciating that the terms 'public' and 'private' simultaneously express a constantly shifting social and psychic world. Focusing broadly on nineteenth-century England, she proposes that gendered notions of public and private also interact with the institutions of private property and the market, as well as with notions of rational individualism. Davidoff charts the gendered creation of various public domains that had rational man at its centre and embodied woman at the periphery. Observing that the masculine domination of the public was never unproblematic, she calls attention to nineteenth-century British women's participation in the semi-public realm of 'the social' as charity workers or volunteers, and their role as feminist political activists.

Mary Ryan is also concerned with the gendered construction of citizenship and the distinctive experience of women citizens in the