

WOMEN OF IDEAS

Eleanor Rathbone

by Johanna Alberti



书馆

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ELEANOR RATHBONE

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SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 1996

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SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, CA 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
32, M-Block Market
Greater Kailash – I
New Delhi 110 048

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-8039-8876-7

Library of Congress catalog record available

Typeset by M Rules

ELEANOR RATHBONE

WOMEN OF IDEAS

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Editorial Board: Cynthia Enloe and Dale Spender

This series consists of short study guides designed to introduce readers to the life, times and work of key women of ideas. The emphasis is very much on the ideas of these women and the political and intellectual circumstances in which their work has been formulated and presented.

The women featured are both contemporary and historical thinkers from a range of disciplines including sociology, economics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, anthropology, history and politics. The series aims to: provide succinct introductions to the ideas of women who have been recognised as major theorists; make the work of major women of ideas accessible to students as well as to the general reader; and appraise and reappraise the work of neglected women of ideas and give them a wider profile.

Each book provides a full bibliography of its subject's writings (where they are easily available) so that readers can continue their study using primary sources.

Books in the series include:

Eleanor Rathbone

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Preface

This series introduces readers to the life, times and work of key 'women of ideas' whose work has influenced people and helped change the times in which they lived. Some people might claim that there are few significant women thinkers. However, a litany of the women whose work is discussed in the first titles to be published gives the lie to this: Simone de Beauvoir, Zora Neale Hurston, Simone Weil, Olive Schreiner, Hannah Arendt, Eleanor Rathbone, Christine Delphy, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, to be followed by Rosa Luxemburg, Melanie Klein, Mary Wollstonecraft, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, Margaret Mead, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Alexandra Kollontai, and others of a similar stature.

Every reader will want to add their own women of ideas to this list – which proves the point. There *are* major bodies of ideas and theories which women have originated; there *are* significant women thinkers; *but* women's intellectual work, like women's other work, is not taken so seriously nor evaluated so highly as men's. It may be men's perceptions of originality and importance which have shaped the definition and evaluation of women's work, but this does not constitute (nor is there any reason to regard it as) a definitive or universal standard. *Women of Ideas* exists to help change such perceptions, by taking women's past and present production of ideas seriously, and by introducing them to a wide new audience. *Women of Ideas* titles include women whose work is well-known from both the past and the present, and also those unfamiliar to modern readers although renowned among their contemporaries. The aim is to make their work accessible by drawing out of what is a frequently diverse and complex body of writing the central ideas and key themes, not least by locating these in relation to the intellectual, political and personal milieux in which this work originated.

Do women of ideas have 'another voice', one distinctive and different from that of men of ideas? or is this an essentialist claim and are ideas at basis unsexed? Certainly women's ideas are differently positioned with regard to their perception and evaluation. It is still a case of women having to be twice as good to be seen as half as good as men, for the apparatus of knowledge/power is configured in ways which do not readily accord women and their work the same status as that of men. However, this does not necessarily mean either that the ideas produced by women are significantly different in kind or, even if they presently are, that this is anything other than the product of the workings of social systems which systematically differentiate between the sexes, with such differences disappearing in an equal and just society. *Women of Ideas* is, among other things, a means of standing back and taking the longer view on such questions, with the series as a whole constituting one of the means of evaluating the 'difference debates', as its authors explore the contributions made by the particular women of ideas that individual titles focus upon.

Popularly, ideas are treated as the product of 'genius', of individual minds inventing what is startlingly original – and absolutely unique to them. However, within feminist thought a different approach is taken, seeing ideas as social products rather than uniquely individual ones, as collective thoughts albeit uttered in the distinctive voices of particular individuals. Here there is a recognition that ideas have a 'historical moment' when they assume their greatest significance – and that 'significance' is neither transhistorical nor transnational, but is rather temporally and culturally specific, so that the 'great ideas' of one time and place can seem commonplace or ridiculous in others. Here too the cyclical and social nature of the life of ideas is recognised, in which 'new' ideas may in fact be 'old' ones in up-to-date language and expression. And, perhaps most importantly for the *Women of Ideas* series, there is also a recognition of the frequently *gendered* basis of the judgements of the 'significance' and 'importance' of ideas and bodies of work.

The title of the series is taken from Dale Spender's (1982) *Women of Ideas, and What Men have Done to Them*. 'What men have done to them' is shorthand for a complex process in which bodies of ideas 'vanish', not so much by being deliberately suppressed (although this has happened) as by being trivialised, misrepresented, excluded from the canon of what is deemed good, significant, great. In addition to these gatekeeping processes, there are other broader factors at work. Times change, intellectual fashion changes also. One product of this is the often very different interpretation and understanding of bodies of ideas over time: when looked at from different – unsympathetic – viewpoints, then dramatic shifts in the representation of these can occur. Such shifts in intellectual fashion sometimes occur in their own right, while at other times they are related to wider social, economic and political changes in the world. Wars, the

expansion and then contraction of colonialism, revolutions, all have had an effect on what people think, how ideas are interpreted and related to, which ideas are seen as important and which outmoded.

'Women of ideas' of course need not necessarily position themselves as feminists nor prioritise concern with gender. The terms 'feminist' and 'woman' are by no means to be collapsed, but they are not to be treated as binaries either. Some major female thinkers focus on the human condition in order to rethink the nature of reality and thus of 'knowledge'. In doing so they also re-position the nature of ideas. Each of the women featured has produced ideas towards that greater whole which is a more comprehensive rethinking of the nature of knowledge. These women have produced ideas which form bodies of systematic thought, as they have pursued trains of thought over the course of their individual lives. This is not to suggest that such ideas give expression to a 'universal essence' in the way Plato proposed. It is instead to reject rigidly dividing 'realist' from 'idealist' from 'materialist', recognising that aspects of these supposedly categorical distinctions can be brought together to illuminate the extraordinarily complex and fascinating process by which ideas are produced and reproduced in particular intellectual, cultural and historical contexts.

The *Women of Ideas* series is, then, concerned with the 'history of ideas'. It recognises the importance of the 'particular voice' as well as the shared context; it insists on the relevance of the thinker as well as that which is thought. It is concerned with individuals in their relation to wider collectivities and contexts, and it focuses upon the role of particular women of ideas without 'personifying' or individualising the processes by which ideas are shaped, produced, changed. It emphasises that there is a history of '*mentalités collectives*', recognising the continuum between the everyday and the elite, between 'commonsense' and 'high theory'. Ideas have most meaning in their use, in the way they influence other minds and wider social processes, something which occurs by challenging and changing patterns of understanding. As well as looking at the impact of particular women of ideas, the series brings their work to a wider audience, to encourage a greater understanding of the contribution of these women to the way that we *do* think – and also the way that we perhaps *should* think – about knowledge and the human condition.

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Milton Keynes UK
UKOW06F1856310516

275329UK00005B/45/P



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Introduction

Eleanor Rathbone (1872–1946) was a suffragist in the reign of Queen Victoria who became a Member of Parliament at the first election in which all women could vote in Britain. She is the one feminist who was active in the Victorian women's movement and then in the parliamentary political arena within which that movement had sought to give women a place and power. Her ideas therefore provide us with a way of tracing the thinking of a Victorian feminist through the Edwardian suffrage era to the period after the First World War when the women's movement seemed to disappear.

Feminist historians have devoted much attention to the Victorian women's movement. Eleanor Rathbone's life demonstrates what some of the results of that movement were. She was given the tools to move at least some distance away from the Victorian mould because she benefited from one of the earliest campaigns of the Victorian women's movement for higher education, becoming a student at Somerville College, Oxford. Her years of study provided her with intellectual confidence, but she rejected the possibility of staying in academic life, disapproving of the detachment from the world that such a life would have offered. Instead she moved into the world of social action.

Rathbone chose social and political engagement because the wrongs of the world shouted in her ears (Stocks, 1949: 53). Her aim from the first was to give herself the satisfaction of being able

to achieve change in a visible and tangible way. This discourse had its roots firmly in her Victorian heritage. Her early life and thought were strongly influenced by her father, who devoted his wealth and his energies to public and political activities such as the establishment of district nursing, the foundation of Liverpool University and the relief of poverty. But Eleanor's work as a visitor for the Liverpool Central Relief Society led her to desire to change not just people's lives but the structure of the organisation. Examination of her ideas provides us with a sense of the way one feminist moved from concern with the lives of individuals to a more general political analysis of social deprivation.

The pattern of Rathbone's thinking before the First World War gives us a tool for the exploration of the interconnections between feminism and other Edwardian discourses of the public and the private. Like other Victorian feminists, her feminism was rooted in social action and the experience of living in a community of like-minded women. Through the Victoria Women's Settlement she met Elizabeth Macadam, who became her lifetime's companion. Their first public co-operation was on a scheme to enable social workers in the Liverpool area to be trained and educated at the Liverpool School of Social Studies and Training for Social Work.

Rathbone's understanding of suffrage illuminates the links between social action and feminism. She rejected the concept that women could fulfil their role as citizens without the vote, and believed that women could and should play a full role in British political democracy. She wanted women to be able to exercise political power partly because she herself desired agency. The path which she took towards political power throws light on the genesis of women's participation in political structures. Her move from Victorian social work to political action was facilitated by her work as a social investigator: her involvement in social investigation gave her a platform from which to begin to argue a political case. Her early writings are reports on the result of social investigations and the recommendations gradually move in the direction of state intervention. She became the first woman city councillor in Liverpool, seeing local politics as a place where women could prove themselves and also bring pressure to bear for the recognition of their need for the vote.

During her lifetime Rathbone was best known as a combative campaigner for family allowances. From her observations of poverty in the working-class homes she visited, she concluded that the main source of such deprivation was inadequate wages for families with children. This unsurprising analysis came together with another strand in her thinking which had begun with a theoretical survey of women's low wages she had made in 1902. Her solution to both these evils was the payment by the state of allowances to mothers and children. She argued that equal pay should follow rather than precede such payment. Her thinking as a feminist on this issue was inextricable from her determination to tackle poverty.

An examination of the continuity and change in Rathbone's ideas gives us a glimpse into the way feminism can seem to disappear in a hostile context. The dispersal of the women's movement in the interwar period has not received much attention from historians, and Rathbone's history gives us some purchase on what that dispersal meant to an active political feminist. The suffrage movement brought her in contact with the deeply ingrained misogyny of the society in which she lived. Her awareness of this hostility and of the precarious nature of women's position within the political structures puts into perspective the lack of political change in this period. Because she was desperate to ameliorate suffering, she was willing to compromise, hoping that attitudes would gradually change, but unprepared to wait for such change to take place before some action was taken. Her thinking provides us with one perspective on the way feminist power was exercised through the democratic process. She spoke as a feminist and saw herself as a representative of the interests of women, especially working-class married women. The instability of this position is documented in her speeches as an MP.

Questions of cultural identity are in the forefront of feminist ideas today, and Rathbone's ideas on citizenship were firmly embedded in a national identity. Citizens should serve their country, she asserted: this was part of a deeply felt patriotism shaped by living through two wars which she understood to have been fought in defence of democracy and liberty. Her faith in the basic goodness of the British people was the rhetorical basis from which she

persistently criticised the British government. When faced with Indian women's perspective on British imperialism she was perplexed, and a study of her response is rich in information about British cultural imperialism.

Finally, Rathbone's thinking provides fascinating material on the subtlety and fluidity of feminist ideas on equality and difference. She did not put forward an essentialist case for women's influence within the political structures, but she did express a hope that women might, because of their experiences in life, have 'a specially good reception' of the 'wave-length to suffering' (Rathbone, 1929: 48). This construction released her to argue a passionate case for those she felt were suffering most in the world: child brides in India, children living in poverty, refugees from Nazism. Working within a patriarchal context, she did not doubt the validity of her own analysis and never lost her inner conviction that she spoke as a feminist.

Eleanor Rathbone: a life

A life of Eleanor Rathbone is interwoven into the exploration of her ideas in this volume: there is no way in which they could have been separated. At the end of this chapter a list of dates is intended to give a framework of reference for her life. At present there is only one extant biography of Rathbone, written by her friend Mary Stocks soon after her death and published in 1949. It is out of print. However, Susan Pedersen is working on a biography: her articles are described in the annotated key texts at the end of the book.

What is most striking about Eleanor Rathbone is the extent of her political activities. She was above all a campaigner and this makes the attempt to provide a clear summary of her ideas a frustrating task. As Antoinette Burton has pointed out, middle-class British feminists 'occupied a place at the crossroads of several interlocking identities', as feminist, British and bourgeois (Burton, 1991: 69). Rathbone's identities are blurred, and the shape of her ideas made more elusive by her insistence on remedies rather than theories. She took as a basic premise that there *are* solutions to problems, that it is possible to make the world a better place. She

wrote mainly to persuade her readers to *do* something. Reading Rathbone has put me in touch with the ethical roots of my own political beliefs, and her life reminds me of my early optimism about political efficacy. These bubble dreams have been pricked by 16 years of reactionary government and international instability causing suffering to millions. This is very similar to the context in which Eleanor Rathbone lived, and her energy has been a goad, her refusal to abandon hope an inspiration.

The variety of Eleanor Rathbone's activities also makes the task of placing her ideas in relation to other political and intellectual ideas of the time a daunting task. What follows here is a brief and simplified outline of the ideological context in which she operated, together with the references to the annotated bibliography which give more detailed analysis of that context.

Chapter 1 (Heritage) looks at the ideas and values which formed Rathbone's Victorian inheritance. She did not subscribe to any one political philosophy, turning away impatiently from the 'great questions' soon after her university days to the immediacy of social work. But she held to a constant belief in the primacy of an ethical politics, and in the adaptability of human beings to control and improve their economic environment. As a student she was taught by D.G. Ritchie, whose ideas were influential in the development of what has become known as the 'new liberalism' (Freeden, 1978). The new liberals conformed to current ideas about the possibility of establishing explanations for human behaviour from empirical observation. Rathbone became a social investigator of the lives of the poor of Liverpool, and worked with organisations such as the Women's Co-operative Guild in a survey of the living standards of widows under the Poor Law. Her main motivation, however, was always one of persuasion rather than discovery. She moved into the Victorian women's movement, in particular the suffrage and settlement movements. These structures offered her 'a model of alternative political and personal behaviour which valued a pragmatic humanitarianism, whatever its limitations, over the politics of domination' (Levine, 1987: 161).

Chapter 2 (The Public and the Private, 1909–19) focuses on her ideas about the state and describes her involvement in social work up to the end of the First World War. Rathbone's acceptance of

state intervention was informed by an ideology which was close to the ideas formulated by Ritchie and the 'new liberals' who were influential in giving ideological backing to the social welfare legislation of the Liberal Party in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Anna Davin has argued that, while state intervention was becoming more acceptable over this period, it was contained within an individualist ideology which stressed the mother's role in the creation of a healthy workforce (Davin, 1978).

In the period before 1914 the question of the role of the state in relieving the oppression of both class and gender was a controversial one (Thane, 1984; Lewis, 1986; Stoate, 1988; Lewis, 1991a). Crucial to this debate were understandings of the family (Dyhouse, 1989; Land, 1990; Lewis, 1991b). Feminists wanted to see change, especially in the economic deprivation which women and children suffered, and there was a wide variety of solutions offered. Philippa Levine has pointed out that feminists experienced bewilderment and contradiction in seeking solutions to such problems, and she warns us to recognise that: 'Whilst feminists at this time were clear in their articulation of the gendered ills of their society, they were still within its grasp as the constructors and consumers of their culture' (Levine, 1990: 176).

Recent studies of the women's suffrage movement have challenged Les Garner's conclusion that 'suffragism had a limited concept of equality based on entry into the male world' (Garner, 1984: 114; see also Holton, 1986; Kent, 1987; Rubinstein, 1991; Vellacott, 1993). The feminist demand for the vote contained within it an implicit and often explicit belief in the power of legislation to effect social change. Rathbone shared this faith: her understanding of suffrage was close, if not identical to, the demand for a 'feminised democracy' identified by Sandra Holton (1986). She devoted her life to achieving political change first as city councillor from 1909 to 1935, and then as an MP from 1929 until her death in 1946. She was at her most buoyant about the possibility of change through Parliamentary means in the period 1909-18 because of the strength and political influence of the suffrage movement and because of what she saw as the positive influence of the war. The way war undermined the position of women has been analysed by Lucy Bland (1985) and also by Susan Kingsley Kent (1993) who

has argued that 'The Great War shattered the category of "women" in ways that may have made it impossible, before the 1960s, for feminists to effectively recover their movement, its goals and its critique of the gender system' (p. 143). Susan Pedersen has argued that the fault at the heart of Rathbone's wartime optimism was the acceptance of a construction of the family with the man as the breadwinner (Pedersen, 1990).

Chapter 3 (Equality and Difference, 1911–29) is concerned with Rathbone's ideas about gender equality and difference, and also her understanding of the differences between women. Rathbone's name is firmly associated in studies of feminism with her elaboration of what became known as the 'New Feminism'. The ideology so labelled was not in fact new (Holton, 1986; Black, 1989). The factors behind its reappearance in the interwar period and its effects have been much debated in recent years (Lewis, 1975; Fleming, 1986; Pugh, 1992). Recent assessments of the results of the challenge to male paradigms which was the professed ambition of New Feminists have concentrated on failure. Susan Pedersen has written a telling and 'cautionary tale about the dangers of the adoption of difference-based arguments in a world where women lack significant institutional or economic power' (1989: 106). Most recently, Susan Kingsley Kent has argued that the new feminism amounted to collusion with the ideology of separate spheres and the result was that 'By the end of the 1920s, "new" feminists found themselves in a conceptual bind that trapped women in "traditional" domestic and maternal roles, and limited their ability to advocate equality and justice for women' (1993: 7).

I have emphasised the hostility of the political context of the interwar period to the achievement of feminist claims. There was intense debate about the political enfranchisement of women and one that was informed by fear of women's power. Feminist responses to this hostility varied: the use of the freedom of fiction to explore possibilities was one response, another was the creation of an androgynous world (Smith-Rosenberg, 1985). The 'new feminism' was constructed at this period in opposition to a focus on equality which Rathbone felt was becoming arid, and in the context of the burgeoning of women's organisations rooted in women's private, domestic desires (Light, 1991; Giles, 1993; Morgan, 1994).