Gender
in
Political
Theory

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Introduction

Gender theory, in all its complex forms, has worked to unsettle established conventions about the nature and boundaries of the political. Until the emergence of feminist theory as a recognized academic perspective, contemporary political theory was largely assumed to be gender-neutral in focus. This assumption has now been subject to extensive critique. To look at gendered perspectives in political theory is not to engender that which was gender-neutral: it is to reveal the highly gendered nature of mainstream political theorizing. This entails outlining alternative gendered perspectives that are silenced by mistaking a particular perspective for impartiality. It is to create space for more heterogeneous gendered perspectives within political theory.

There is an oddly paradoxical relation between politics and gender. On the one hand issues of gender are clearly central to any understanding of the political. Both the practice and the study of politics have long been notoriously masculine endeavours. So much so that many commentators have argued that politics has historically been the most explicitly masculine human activity of all. It has been more exclusively limited to men and more self-consciously masculine than any other social practice (Brown 1988: 4). The institutional manifestations of politics located in government have been notoriously resistant to the incorporation of women, their interests or perspectives. Women have by and large been excluded from traditional political activity and discouraged from defining their activities as political. In this sense issues of gender have long been constitutive of the definition and operation of

politics. On the other hand issues of gender are largely assumed to be irrelevant to the political. If gender is understood, as it frequently has been, as synonymous with women, then women's absence from the political sphere can be taken to imply that gender issues are simply not relevant to politics.

In the light of this apparent paradox, explorations of gender in political theory have to date been undertaken primarily by those pursuing a feminist agenda. For it is feminists who have been most sensitive to the fallacy involved in conflating men with individuals and masculinity with neutrality. So, while it is feminist political theory that has explicitly theorized gender in recent times, it is entirely possible to consider gender in political theory from perspectives other than feminist. There is, for instance, a growing body of literature exploring men and masculinity, which might usefully inform considerations of gender in political theory, and which is distinct (in its intellectual and political focus) from the extensive feminist literature that has developed. Nonetheless, given the overwhelmingly masculine nature of politics up to the present time, it has been feminists who have had the strongest political motivation and intellectual ambition to explore gender in political theory. And it is for this reason that I draw on feminist political theory in the following reflections on gender in political theory. It should become clear by the end of the book, though, that future explorations of gender in political theory are far less likely to be so dependent on an exclusively feminist literature. The feminist debates considered in this book have opened up the space for rethinking gender in more multiple ways, allowing us to move beyond the male–female dichotomy as it has operated within political (and also much feminist) theory to date.

It still makes sense to approach the issue of gender in political theory via feminist theory, not least because the literature that engages with this topic is either focused on, or has emerged from, 'the woman question'. Nonetheless, I accept that to focus exclusively on the woman question is to make men and masculinity the unnamed norm and to silence gender (in its fullest sense) as an analytic category (Ferguson 1993: 2). My aim is to show how feminist theorizing has transformed the terms of debate within political theory such that it becomes possible to theorize not only female subjectivity but also female and male subjectivities (in pluralized forms), and ultimately corporeal subjectivities more generally. The implicit presumption that the discipline was concerned with 'the man question' was challenged by the demand that it overtly consider 'the woman question'. This demand is itself now challenged by the proposal that the more important task is to consider the complexities of gender questions beyond the confines of the dichotomous construction of masculinity and femininity.

Not only is the relation between politics and gender paradoxical, and the relation between gender and feminism shifting; intriguingly the relation between feminism and politics is also paradoxical. Feminists routinely claim that politics has consistently excluded women. They also claim that feminism is explicitly political. Feminism, as Anne Phillips tells us, 'is politics' (Phillips 1998: 1). Its project, to realize fundamental transformations in gender relations, is overtly political in the sense that it seeks to shift existing power relations in favour of women. The apparent tension between the claim that 'feminism is politics' and that politics has been exclusively limited to men lies in the different notions of politics employed here. Women have largely been excluded from the political, where politics is defined as the institutional forum of government. But, when defined primarily as a process of negotiation or struggle over the distribution of power, it becomes evident that, far from being excluded from politics, women have both shaped and been shaped by its operation. In other words, the apparently paradoxical nature of these two statements subjects the political itself to scrutiny. It also raises questions about the nature of feminist objectives in relation to the political: is the ambition to include women in a political from which they are currently excluded, or to reconfigure a political by which they are currently oppressed? Or is it to displace the apparent opposition between these two options? The centrality of these three strategies will become apparent in the course of this book.

I shall be using a typology of 'inclusion', 'reversal' and 'displacement' to map out three importantly distinct approaches to gender in political theory. Those pursuing a strategy of inclusion aim to include women in a political from which they are currently excluded. They usually aspire to impartiality, conceive of people as autonomous and espouse an equality politics. They are often labelled liberal feminists. Those pursuing a strategy of reversal aim to reconfigure the political as currently conceived such that it becomes more open to their gendered specificity. They usually adopt an interpretative methodology, talk of 'Woman' or 'women' and espouse a difference politics. They are often labelled radical, maternal or cultural feminists. Those pursuing a strategy of displacement aim to destabilize the apparent opposition between the strategies of inclusion and reversal. They usually adopt a genealogical methodology, speak of subject positions and of gendering (as a verb) rather than gender (as a noun) and espouse a diversity politics. They are often labelled postmodern or post-structuralist feminists. The strategy of inclusion seeks gender-neutrality; the strategy of reversal seeks recognition for a specifically female gendered identity; and the strategy of displacement seeks to deconstruct those discursive regimes that engender the subject.

Kathy Ferguson neatly summarizes the distinction between the three archetypal strategies. In the first, she argues, women's exclusion is problematized, in the second, men are problematized, and in the third 'the gendered world itself becomes a problem' (Ferguson 1993: 3). Christine Di Stefano offers a similar tripartite distinction (which she labels rationalist, anti-rationalist and post-rationalist respectively). In the first frame '*she* dissolves into *he* as gender differences are collapsed into the (masculine) figure of the Everyman.' In the second, '*she* is preserved at the expense of her transformation and liberation from the conventions of femininity.' In the third, '*she* dissolves into a perplexing plurality of difference, none of which can be theoretically or politically privileged over others' (Di Stefano 1990: 77).

This last strategy of displacement has had profound implications for the nature of debate within gender theory. Before its impact it was common to find feminist theory characterized by a clear opposition between those who would endorse and extend dominant values to all irrespective of gender, and those who would challenge and reverse dominant values from a specifically female perspective. The advocate of displacement, by contrast, argues that, whether gender justice was thought to entail the extension or reversal of dominant norms, it actually manifests a tendency to echo that which it sought to oppose. Both operate, in different ways, within a dichotomous framework generated by established power networks. The truly radical project is here understood to entail recasting rather than sustaining or rejecting masculinist binary thought (Brown 1995: 20).

The normative task for the theorist aiming at inclusion is to argue that gender ought to be non-pertinent to politics. The normative task for the theorist aiming at reversal is to argue that politics ought to be reconstructed to manifest the distinctive perspective of non-hegemonic gender identities (usually female). The normative task for the theorist aiming at displacement is to reveal the extent to which gendered identities are themselves products of particular political discourses (although – it should be noted – there is some uncertainty as to whether this is actually a normative project at all). Understanding the nature of, and interplay between, these three strategies is vital to understanding current debates about gender in political theory. Between them, they map the current preoccupations of gender theorists.

These strategies of inclusion, reversal and displacement are, though, only archetypes. They are rarely manifest in their pure form in practice. They should not be taken to delimit the range of political perspectives possible. To get too bogged down in a dispute between them is to confuse archetypal purity for actual complexity. It is, if you like, to confuse characters with characteristics. As each character embraces a multitude

of complex (and often conflicting) characteristics, so too individual theorists and activists inevitably oscillate between and within the three political perspectives delineated. There will always be some who adopt one perspective unambiguously. But it does not lessen the significance or pertinence of the archetypes to recognize that one can (and most do) adopt a more fluid relation to them than this.

It is also worth noting that, although my intention is to convey the diversity of opinion within current writing on gender in political theory without oversimplifying the literature, by imposing a typology on what is actually a very complex field I shall inevitably be creating my own frame of analysis. The creation of frames from which one can view the literature is a political act in itself, and one that the reader might usefully reflect upon. Though these three strategies have come of late to be seen as central to gender theory, they do, notwithstanding their complexity and diversity, occlude many of the concerns central to socialist and Marxist feminists. Significant exclusions, which are themselves revealing, arise from constructing the focus of gender theory in this way. Notably, the inclusion, reversal, displacement schema focuses attention on, as it is largely shaped by, questions of subjectivity.

A real achievement of the gender in political theory literature has been to focus attention squarely on the ontological presumptions underpinning existing political debates. Those theories that did not explicitly address the ontological relied on an implicit and unexamined view of these issues. If dominant debates in political theory rarely explicitly addressed questions of gender identity, it was because these were presumed rather than absent. Feminist political theory has challenged this presumption in a three-stage project. It has first of all uncovered and made explicit the ontological assumptions implicit in existing advocacy debates about justice. It has then engaged directly in ontological questions and critically evaluated implicit ontological assumptions. Finally, it has returned to and reconceptualized the advocacy debates in the context of this new ontological 'background'.

The obvious focus of much of the early feminist political theory was directed towards the first of these tasks: engaging in detailed and thorough critique of the ontological presumptions within mainstream texts and making explicit the gendered nature of the canon of political theory. More recent feminist political theory, the focus of this book, has moved on to address the second and third tasks: the direct reconceptualization of the ontological background framing future advocacy debates; and the subsequent 'revisioning of the political' itself (see Yeatman 1994b and Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996). The second of these tasks has generated extensive and, at times, heated debates. These are outlined in Part I.

The third task, that of revisioning the political in the light of the new ontological background, is still underway and will be considered in Part II. The chapters in this section focus on the issues of equality, justice, citizenship and representation respectively – central categories of mainstream political theory and therefore equally central sites of the revisioning of the political from gendered perspectives. These attempts to elaborate a reconceived conception of politics are clearly a part of the third phase of feminist theory. They have been and will continue to be hugely invigorating and beneficial for political theory.

Although the fractious frames delineated in Part I correlate to the political strategies of inclusion, reversal and displacement surveyed in relation to specific political issues in Part II, they are not synonymous. I have distinguished between ontological debates in Part I and advocacy debates in Part II in order to focus attention on the different order of debate at play in each, and to encourage reflection on the appropriate relation between the two. As Charles Taylor has argued, ontological and advocacy issues are distinct 'in the sense that taking a position on one does not force your hand on the other. On the other hand, they are not completely independent, in that the stand one takes on the ontological level can be part of the essential background of the view one advocates' (Taylor 1991: 160). It is, Taylor argues, the inadequate appreciation of the distinctness and the connection that confuses debate. The distinction between these two orders of debate is signalled in this book by the division between Parts I and II. Part I outlines the ontological and methodological background disputes that frame more particular advocacy debates. The stance adopted in relation to the ontological and methodological debates of Part I provides the 'essential background' to the distinctive strategies of inclusion, reversal and displacement that are evident in Part II, but does not itself do all the work. The project of reconceptualizing the political will also require a direct engagement with issues of advocacy.

The chapters in Part II address specific debates within political theory. The debates considered are those which address the core political concepts of equality, justice, citizenship and representation. Each debate is structured around the three strategies outlined above. The first perspective in each of the chapters in Part II represents the position from which gender is to be transcended to allow political theory to be neutral. The task of the theorist concerned with gender and political theory is to rid political theory of an inappropriate intrusion of gendered identities where they ought properly to be non-pertinent. The second perspective is characterized by the belief that gender identities are to be asserted as the basis for a reconceptualized, but inherently gendered, political theory. The task of the theorist concerned with gender and political theory here

is to reverse political theory's masculine presumptions and articulate a distinctively feminine or feminist political theory. The third perspective holds the concept of gender to be partly constituted by the discourses of political theory itself. The task of the theorist concerned with gender and political theory here is neither to de-gender nor to re-gender political theory, but to reveal the ways in which political theory genders.

In order to grasp in more detail what the project of 'gender in political theory' entails, let us consider the nature of the discipline of politics, comprising both political science and political theory and the ways in which the issue of gender gets configured, or excluded, by these formulations of the political. We can then turn our attention to the nature of feminist theorizing outside the confines of politics, focusing on the ambivalent relation between feminism and theory and the inter-disciplinary nature of feminist theorizing. Drawing these reflections together, we can look at the way in which feminist theory relates to political theory. It should then be possible to consider how and why the project of gender in political studies is conceived of in distinct ways.

The Discipline of Politics

The origins of the discipline of politics are commonly located with Aristotle's *The Politics*, in which he evaluates differing constitutions in search of the best method of government. Since this time there has been deep-rooted disagreement as to what constitutes the political. There is even disagreement about the status of statements about the nature of the political. With regard to definitions of the political, there are those who define politics in terms of governmental institutions and others who define it in terms of relations of power. Some focus on a narrowly defined range of power relations; others adopt a very broad range. With regard to the status of such definitions themselves, there are those who argue that there is an empirically verifiable truth as to what constitutes the political (Easton 1968). There are others who maintain that any definition will be no more than a contingent social construction, the discipline of politics being dependent upon the nature of the political arena, itself dependent upon socially constructed and historically variable forces. Definitions of the political are not therefore discoverable in nature but are rather a legacy or convention (Wolin 1961: 5).

It is this second contextualist approach that is more dominant in contemporary debates. While the positivist perspective (endorsing objectivity) was strongly articulated throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the more common approach during the 1970s and 1980s was social constructionist in relation to status (Leftwich 1984a: 4). During the 1990s,

with the rise of deconstructionist methodologies, a third perspective also emerged in relation to this debate. Definitions of the political, it is now frequently argued, are neither empirically true nor simply reflections of underlying social relations, but rather active means to shape the 'real' world. Political theory does not reflect already given social relations, as Kate Nash argues, 'it is part of attempts to institute them' (Nash 1998: 50). This insight has increased the intensity of the debate concerning the substance of these definitions.

In recent times debates within political studies about the nature of the political have tended to be polarized between advocates of politics as institutions of government and as relations of power. In the former the political is equated with the juridical – issues of rights, justice and responsibility. In the latter the political is equated with the instrumental – issues of power, policy and pragmatism. Within this debate politics gets bifurcated, as William Connolly tells us, between principle and instrumentality, 'with one group of individualists (rights theorists, theorists of justice) celebrating the former and another group (utilitarians, pragmatists) insisting upon the incorrigibility of the latter' (Connolly 1991: 74). On the institutional conception of the political politics is defined as government institutions. On the instrumental conception of the political politics is defined as power and decision-making. These two different conceptions of politics generate two different sets of criteria for differentiating political life from all other aspects of society and 'thereby for isolating the subject matter of Political Science' (Easton 1968: 283).

The institutional perspective has been a dominant one within the academic study of politics in contemporary liberal states. Many people have argued that the instrumentalist perspective emerges in response to the perceived inadequacies of the principled or institutional perspective (Easton 1968, Connolly 1991). During the 1970s the instrumental conception of politics was even deemed the true definition, finally releasing political science 'from its synthetic past', thereby enabling theoretical consensus (Easton 1968: 87). Now, however, it is more common to find academics arguing that both perspectives are the partial and flawed product of an underlying, though itself socially constructed, commitment to individualism. Connolly, for example, asserts that neither faction 'comes to terms vigorously with the constructed character of both the virtuous self and the self-interested self or with the extent to which both constructions were valued by their early theoretical designers because of their calculability, predictability, and utility to sovereign power' (Connolly 1991: 74). In other words, the institutional and the instrumental conceptions of the political adopt very different understandings of people (pursuing moral reason or self-interest) but share a common