Feminism and Politics

Edited by
Anne Phillips

Oxford · New York
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1998
Contents

Notes on contributors vii

Introduction 1

Anne Phillips

I. Feminism and Political Studies 3

1. Politics an Unnatural Practice: Political Science Looks at Female Participation 23

Susan Bourque and Jean Grossholtz

2. Homeless in International Relations? ‘Women’s’ Place in Canonical Texts and Feminist Reimaginings 44

Christine Sylvester

3. Feminist Studies and Political Science—and Vice Versa 67

Virginia Sapiro

II. Feminism and Political Theory 93

4. ‘Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth’: Women and the Origins of Liberalism

Teresa Brennan and Carole Pateman

5. Gender, the Public, and the Private 116

Susan Moller Okin

6. Feminism and Democracy 142

Jane Mansbridge

III. Interests and Representation 161

7. When are Interests Interesting? The Problem of Political Representation of Women

Virginia Sapiro

8. Beyond Interests in Politics: A Comment on Virginia Sapiro’s ‘When Are Interests Interesting? The Problem of Political Representation of Women’ 193

Irene Diamond and Nancy Hartsock

9. ‘Women’s Interests’ and the Poststructuralist State 203

Rosemary Pringle and Sophie Watson


Anne Phillips
For centuries, while men ran governments and wrote political philosophy, the experience of women had little influence on democratic practice or thought. Recently, however, feminist ideas have been at the centre of an emerging debate about the nature of democratic politics.

The dominant tradition in political science sees democracy primarily as a method of summing up individual desires rooted in self-interest. The tradition’s critics emphasize that any workable democracy requires that its citizens and representatives think not only as ‘I’, but also as ‘we’. Democracy involves public discussion of common problems, not just a silent counting of individual hands. And when people talk together, the discussion can sometimes lead the participants to see their own stake in the broader interests of the community. Indeed, at its best, the democratic process resolves conflict not only by majority will, but by discovering answers that integrate the interests of minorities. Thus a ‘deliberative democracy’ does not simply register preferences that individuals already have; it encourages citizens to think about their interests differently.

Two strands of feminist writing illuminate the debate on deliberative democracy. One strand, which celebrates women’s greater nurturance, modifies and enriches the deliberative framework by providing images and models of practice from women’s experience. In this view, women’s socialization and role in child-rearing, among other causes, makes them especially concerned to transform ‘I’ into ‘we’ and to seek solutions to conflict that accommodate diverse and often suppressed desires. In our society women are usually brought up to identify their own good with that of others, especially their children and husbands. More than men, women build their identities through relationships with friends. As Jennifer Nedelsky puts it, the female self has more ‘permeable’ boundaries. Feminist writers propose this capacity for broader self-definition as a model for democratic politics.

Yet, as feminists are also well aware, the very capacity to identify with others can easily be manipulated to the disadvantage of women. A second strand of feminist thought, which focuses on male oppression, warns against deliberation serving as a mask for domination. Permeability, Andrea Dworkin demonstrates, is the avenue for invasion as well as intimacy. The transformation of ‘I’ into ‘we’ brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle forms of control. Even the language people use as they reason together usually favours one way of seeing things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover that they are not heard. Feminists who focus on the inequality of power between men and women point to the ways women are silenced, encouraged to keep their wants inchoate, and heard to say ‘yes’ when they mean ‘no’. These same insights help us to grasp other forms of domination, such as those based on wealth, that can also infect the deliberative process.

So, as political theorists turn to thinking about democracy as deliberation, feminist thought lends both encouragement and caution. Feminists bring to the new stress on deliberation experiences of a self accustomed to encompassing others’ welfare in its own and achieving that common welfare more by persuasion than by power. Yet feminists also bring a vivid recognition of the capacity of a dominant group to silence or ignore voices it does not wish to hear.

---

DEMOCRACY AS DELIBERATION

Democracy originally meant deliberative democracy. Aristotle, while not a democrat, still concluded that the people in their deliberative capacity could come to better decisions on many matters than could an expert—‘just as a feast to which many contribute is better than one provided by a single person’. The great writers on democracy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw democracy as primarily a way of reasoning together to promote the common good. James Madison thought that factions pitted against one another could cancel each other out, allowing men of public virtue the space to deliberate and make wise decisions. John Stuart Mill argued that the most important business of a representative...
assembly was ‘talk’, bringing to bear different perspectives on the public’s interests. Before the Second World War, Ernest Barker, the great translator of Aristotle’s *Politics*, defined democracy not, in its essence, as a matter of voting, but rather as ‘a method of government by laying heads together, in a common debate in which all share, to attain a result which as many as possible are agreed in accepting’.

The political thought that emerged from World War II reversed this emphasis on deliberation and the common good, demanding the recognition of power and conflict. Schools of thought as disparate and mutually contradictory as those of Marx, Freud, Arthur Bentley (founder of the group conflict view of politics), and neoclassical economics all assumed a political world based on self-interest, power, and competing interests.

In 1942 the economist Joseph Schumpeter formalized a deeply influential theory that recast democracy as a marketplace. In democracy, as Schumpeter understood it, there is no common good or public interest. Voters pursue their individual interests by making demands on the political system in proportion to the intensity of their feelings. Politicians, also pursuing their own interests, adopt policies that buy them votes, thus ensuring accountability. To stay in office, politicians act like entrepreneurs and brokers, looking for formulas that satisfy as many interests as possible. The decisions that emerge from the interchange between self-interested voters and self-interested brokers come as close as possible to a balanced sum of individual interests. In politics as marketplace, candidates are commodities, selling themselves or being sold.

For a generation, in American political science, Schumpeter’s formulation underlay the dominant understanding of democratic practice. It also seemed to many to represent a democratic ideal. The study of pluralism, interest groups and who gets what, where, when, and how, typically assumed that citizens (and their representatives) were self-interested and that interests would conflict. Most of those who criticized the American polity, whether from the right, the mainstream, or the left, also agreed with these underlying assumptions about politics as power.

Ten years ago, the tide began to turn again. A few political scientists began to point out that some legislative actions were inexplicable unless representatives cared about good public policy as well as reelection. Legislators in the House and Senate, for example, voted in the late 1970s and early 1980s to deregulate the airline and trucking industries, a move they thought would benefit the public. They did so against strong lobbying by both the unions and the industries, which had close relations with the regulatory commissions. Political scientists now also noticed that citizens took stands on issues like Vietnam and bussing less because the policy they favoured would benefit them than because they thought that policy was right.

In small towns the concern of citizens for the common good was, if anything, even stronger. My own study of a small New England town and a collectively run workplace convinced me that the implicit theory of democracy in these small polities differed sharply from Schumpeter’s marketplace model. Schumpeter handled conflict, in theory, by counting and weighing preferences. The members of the communities I came to know assumed that on many issues there was a common good and that reasoning together—deliberation—could let them discover or create that good.

When recent democratic theorists reject the conception of democracy as only a mechanism for aggregating conflicting and self-interested preferences, they draw on several independent philosophical traditions. J. G. A. Pocock and Garry Wills have demonstrated that the framers of the American Constitution, far from reflecting only Lockeian individualism, wanted to promote both public spirit and benevolence. Pocock traces the concern for public spirit to Machiavelli’s writing on the corruption of republican virtue in Florence; Wills traces the concern for benevolence to the Scottish Enlightenment. Cass Sunstein argues that the United States Supreme Court has never countenanced a theory of democracy based purely on aggregating preferences. Although the Court will generally not look beneath the rationale that legislators present, it has always insisted in principle that legislation be guided by a public interest. Jürgen Habermas, writing on public spaces and the characteristics of an ideal ‘speech situation’, has inspired many to ask what institutions and structures of power are most hospitable to public deliberation.

The new deliberative theorists have suggested various institutional changes to renew the democratic process.

- *Infusions of direct democracy*. Decentralizing some decisions to neighbourhood assemblies and relying more on city, state, and national referenda might help promote deliberation. Benjamin Barber suggests that the first stage of a referendum be multiple choice, phrased to allow voters to express their intensity of support and to endorse a principle but not the specific proposal. That stage might be tied to attendance at a deliberative neighbourhood assembly. The second stage, after a deliberative period of several months, would be the more traditional yes/no ballot.
• Election reforms. The framework of campaign debates is a proper subject for legislation. The League of Women Voters’ format for debates should be reinstated and expanded to cover candidates on the state and city levels. Public funds should finance large blocks of television time for discussing the issues. And by closing schools and stores and prohibiting sports events on election day as well as the last day of campaigns, the nation could explicitly set aside time for discussion and voter registration. The purpose would be symbolic as well as practical: to signal the value and importance of public discussion.

• Policy juries. Governments could empanel a representative sample of an affected population to review evidence, deliberate on specific policy issues, and advise the appropriate legislature. Minnesota’s experiments with policy juries give legislators a better grasp of considered public opinion than do surveys; and the juries’ deliberations give participants and their friends a chance to exert creative influence over policy.

The quality of deliberation makes or breaks a democracy. Good deliberation produces, along with good solutions, the emotional and intellectual resources to accept hard decisions. Active participation in decisions makes it easier to bear—and understand the reasons for—the losses some decisions entail. The manipulation of participation generates cynicism both in the factory and the polity. Deliberation that accords respect to all participants and rests outcomes on reasons and points of view that stand up under questioning generates outcomes that even opponents can respect.

Theorists who promote deliberation, however, sometimes conflate deliberation and the common good. The language not only of Mill and Barker but also of more recent theorists like Benjamin Barber and Joshua Cohen suggests that deliberation must be deliberation on the common good. Deliberation, in this view, must be framed in terms of ‘we’; claims of self-interest are invalid. Yet ruling self-interest out of order makes it harder for any participant to sort out what is going on. In particular, the less powerful may not find ways to discover that the prevailing sense of ‘we’ does not adequately include them. Deliberation, and the political process more broadly speaking, ought to make participants more aware of their real interests, even when those interests turn out to conflict.

Deliberative theorists also sometimes forget power. When, as often happens, no policy will benefit everyone, democracies require some way of legitimating a process by which one group of people makes another do something that it does not want to do. To avoid giving too much weight to the status quo, democracies must facilitate some exercise of power. They can legitimate the coercion by, in theory, giving each citizen equal power in the process. The system succeeds where each loses on some issues but wins on others. Feminism, in both its nurturant and anti-oppression strands, can correct the vision of both the unrealistically ‘hard-nosed’ political scientists who insist that politics is nothing but power and the deliberative theorists who either reject power altogether or overlook the ways the powerful often use to their advantage the openness of deliberation, its procedures, and the orientation of many participants toward the common good.

---

NURTURANCE: A POLITICS WITHOUT POWER?

Politics without domination is an ideal with a long ancestry on both its paternal and maternal sides. Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, an early prophet of socialism, and Edward Bellamy, the nineteenth-century American utopian, both wanted to replace the government of men by the administration of things. Karl Marx envisioned the withering away of ‘political power properly so called’, that is, class domination. John Stuart Mill and Ernest Barker replaced crude power not with administration but with deliberation. Yet when women arrived at their own understanding of politics without domination, their language often carried overtones of their experiences as mothers. The outcome was not quite the same. Nurturance—a particular form of making the other’s good your own—invaded the political sphere.

In 1818, Hannah Mather Crocker, an early feminist, argued in almost the same breath that God had ‘endowed the female mind with equal powers and faculties’ to those of men and that ‘it must be the appropriate duty and privilege of females, to convince by reason and persuasion’. One hundred years later the suffragists used the same formula of equality with difference. Strategically, the suffragists relied on persuasion because they had little political power. Yet many also believed that women would bring virtue into politics by extending the stance of motherhood to the public sphere, substituting persuasion for power, and replacing party politics with Progressive good government.

In Herland, a feminist utopian novel published six years before women won the suffrage, Charlotte Perkins Gilman painted a
society peopled only by women, where domination had no place. Of the three men who stumble on this utopia, the most aggressive aches to fight, tries to 'master' the women, and glorifies competition. The women return patient understanding, meting out no punishments, and experiencing no competitive feeling stronger than 'a mild triumph as of winning some simple game.'

Without Gilman's explicit concern for nurturance, Mary Parker Follett, an organizational theorist writing a generation later, also argued against 'domination' ('a victory of one side over the other'). She even opposed 'compromise' ('each side gives up a little in order to have peace'), in favour of 'integration', which allows neither side 'to sacrifice anything'. Follett often gave as an example of integration how one day sitting in a library she had wanted a window shut, while another reader had wanted it open. Instead, they opened the window in an unoccupied adjacent room. 'There was no compromise', she wrote, 'because we both got all we really wanted.'

What we would now call 'win/win' solutions, like those Follett proposed, pose a necessary corrective to politics as a battle of wills. Yet it is easy in some feminist visions to mistake the corrective for the whole story, or to mistake the stress on nurturance or empathy for the conclusion that all of human relations can be encompassed in nurturance.

It is also easy to confuse the normative claim that nurturant or attentive approaches to relationships are good in themselves (or promote other values good in themselves) with the empirical claim that women are more likely than men to adopt these approaches. Whether or not women differ from men in nurturance or attentiveness, the moral claims should stand on their own. We should be able to find the language to make a persuasive case for any claim without appeal to gender. Yet because persuasion rests on experience and some experiences are more socially salient to women (whether or not they have actually had the experience of, say, motherhood itself), the persuasive images that come most easily to women will not always strike a responsive chord in men. Some claims will have to take shape within a community that shares the relevant experiences and later be 'translated' for other audiences.

As early as 1968 and 1969, for example, in almost the same moment as discovering themselves as a 'class', with separate and sometimes conflicting interests to those of men, women discovered they had a distinct and in some ways superior 'culture'. For non-separatist strands in feminist thought, the problem became how to integrate the nurturance, listening, and emotional sensitivity of this culture into the politics that women had inherited from men. This project now finds allies among political theorists promoting deliberative democracy.

Feminist Theories of Power

Consider the 'femaleness' of nurturance. Some feminists have reacted to the prevailing definition of politics as only power, and power as only domination, by elaborating what Nancy Hartsock calls 'the feminist theory of power'. Adopting Mary Parker Follett's distinction between 'power over' and 'power with', they have portrayed power not only as dominance but also as 'energy, capacity, and effectiveness'. In 1980 Sara Ruddick became the first academic theorist to bring maternal ideals into politics. Arguing against the conjunction of power and powerlessness in the received understanding of motherhood, Ruddick stated as her project 'the construction of an image of maternal power which is benign, accurate, sturdy and sane', suggesting that women bring to the public world a culture and tradition embodied in the ideal of 'maternal thinking', with its characteristics of 'humility', resilient good humour, realism, respect for persons, and responsiveness to growth. Kathy Ferguson soon urged that in creating new forms of organization, women draw upon values 'structured into women's experience—caring, nurturance, empathy, connectedness'. Virginia Held pointed out that the relation between 'mothering parent' and child provides an understanding of power that does not involve bending another to one's will: 'The mothering person seeks to empower the child to act responsibly. She wants neither to wield power nor to defend herself against the power wielded by the child.' When they are physically weakest, as in infancy and illness, children can 'command' the greatest amount of attention and care—because then their needs are so serious.

Neither Ruddick, nor Ferguson, nor Held, nor any of the many theorists now writing in this vein are trying to replace a political vocabulary based on power with one based on care or intimacy. Their aim is to integrate into political thought a right but neglected vocabulary and set of experiences—neglected because usually allocated to the domestic realm and defined as private, non-political, or even anti-political. This project of integration requires some subtlety. It requires maintaining useful distinctions between the
governmental and non-governmental, and between the particularism of one-to-one empathy and the universalism of solidarity with all humankind. The project does not require merging the public with the private. But it does require seeing relations formed in the private, domestic, and particular realm as reasonable models for, or the first steps toward, some forms of public spirit. The step the ancient Greeks took in using 'philia', or friendship, as 'civic friendship'; the basis of the state, does not differ in form from the suffragists' step, in 'social motherhood', of applying the maternal relation to the larger polity.

Taking motherhood seriously, for example, reveals the radical limitations of political theories based on a misplaced analogy to the marketplace. When Robert Nozick suggests that individuals have a primordial right to own and sell what they produce, Susan Okin replies that in that case mothers own and have a right to sell their children. Mothers' relations with their children usefully undermine neo-classical models of independent individuals, rights, contracts, or owning and selling.

LISTENING AND DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION

Attentiveness to relationships is not the same as 'nurture'. Nancy Chodorow has proposed that boy children may be required, in a society where women give the most care in early childhood, to separate themselves more firmly and oppositionally than girls from their mothers. Thus in later relationships men may feel less intrinsically connected with others. Whether for this reason or for reasons derived from a history of subordination, girls and women in the United States do seem to value relationships more than do boys and men. Girls' games, at least in white middle-class communities, take place in small, relatively homogeneous groups, and de-emphasize the rules and competition that characterize boys' games. Girls and women are better at men at interpreting facial expressions and other interpersonal cues. Women speak less in public than men do, and listen more. As Marlene Dixon put it in 1970, 'Women are trained to nuances, to listening for the subtle cues which carry the message hidden under the words. It is part of that special skill called "intuition" or "empathy" which all female children must learn if they are to be successful in manipulating others to get what they want and to be successful in providing sympathy and understanding to their husbands and lovers.' While the 'all' in her sentence undoubtedly exaggerates, it is true that generations upon generations of women have been taught to be good listeners. As early as the fifth century BC, Sophocles said, 'Silence is a woman's crown.'

The skills of listening—though not of silence—do seem to produce better decisions. The laboratory experiments of social psychologists suggest that the best group decisions (those most likely to produce a 'correct' answer or a creative solution) come when members solicit the opinions of individuals who are initially in a minority. When an experimenter instructs a group to consult every member, the group makes more correct decisions than without these instructions. When leaders facilitate the emergence of minority opinion, their groups perform better than leaderless groups. Organizational consultants have learned from the psychologists the useful though rather jarring phrase, 'I hear you saying ...' To say those words, you need to have listened, and others have a chance to correct what you think you've heard. Without this jargon, feminists teach the same lesson—listening.

Along with promoting an ethic of care and skill in listening, feminist thinkers have also suggested a critical role for the emotions in deliberation. Emotions help tell us who we want to be. Good deliberation is not fostered by 'keeping emotion out of it'. Rather, 'integrative' or 'win/win' solutions often require the emotional capacity to guess what others want, or at least to ask in a genuinely curious and unthreatening way. It takes emotional ability to elicit from people in conflict the sometimes subconscious sentiments and unobserved facts that can help create an integrative solution.

Union members sometimes strike in support of another union's demands; some childless property-owners vote for higher taxes to improve the schools. Such actions are based not only on a rational commitment to maxims that one would will to be universal or on a belief in achieving the greatest good for the greatest number, but also on a process that has evoked empathy, solidarity, or the commitment of one's identity and actions to a principle. The presence of others with interests different from one's own makes it hard, rightly or wrongly, to insist on claims based on pure self-interest. When people with competing claims come face to face, the conflict not only creates selfish competitiveness; it also often becomes emotionally clearer how self-interested behaviour can harm others. When individuals are capable of principled commitment or solidarity, engaging the emotions helps create the self-transformations necessary to think 'we' instead of 'I'.
OVERCOMING THE SUBTLE FORMS OF POWER

But who is the 'we' in a deliberation? 'We' can easily represent a false universality, as 'mankind' used to do. Even if spoken and believed by the subordinate, 'we' may mask a relationship that works against the subordinate's interests. Women's experience of silence, of unexplored wants, of words that do not mean (and are not heard to mean) what they say, and of subtle forms of domination generalize beyond gender to alert both theorists and practitioners to the pitfalls of unequal power in deliberation.

Silence, on its positive side, permits listening. On the negative side, a history of relative silence makes women political actors more likely to understand that when deliberation turns into theatre, it leaves out many who are not, by nature or training, actors. When deliberation turns into a demonstration of logic, it leaves out many who cannot work their emotionally felt needs into a neat equation. When many voices compete for the deliberative floor, the sample that gets heard is not representative.

Many shy men are quiet, but the equivalent percentage of shy women is increased by learning silence as appropriate to their gender. So, too, it is the human condition, not just a gendered condition, not to know what one wants. But over and above the human condition, many women like myself—white middle class citizens of the United States, born in the 1930s and 1940s—were taught not to have too strongly defined wants. Boys wondered, as early as 'soldier, sailor, Indian chief', which kinds of work they were suited for. Middle-class boys wondered what careers they would choose. Girls like myself wondered, instead, what kind of man they would marry. My mother, always practical, increased my range of options in the best way she knew how. She brought me up with an array of skills, she told me more than once, so that I might marry either 'a prince or a pauper'.

Training to be chosen rather than to choose includes not allowing one's wants to become too definite. Keeping one's wants indefinite makes it even harder than usual for one's intellect to learn the signs the self emits of wanting one thing rather than another. Knowing how easy it is to keep one's wants indefinite makes women realize that deliberative assemblies must work actively at helping participants discover and create what they truly want. Preferences themselves, let alone interests, are not given. They must be tentatively voiced, tested, examined against the causes that produced them, explored, and finally made one's own. Good deliberation must rest on institutions that foster dissent and on images of appropriate behaviour that allow for fumbling and changing one's mind, that respect the tentativeness of this process. Only such safeguards can help participants find where they themselves want to go.

Words are the very stuff of deliberation. But women traditionally have been trained not to say what they mean. Carole Pateman directs us to the last chapter of Rousseau's Emile, the first handbook of progressive education, designed to produce a virtuous and naturally healthy man and woman. After all the brave first chapters, where Emile is raised to emotional honesty and to despise the hypocrisy of the city and the court, it comes as a shock, when Rousseau turns to Sophie, to have him teach her to say 'no' when she means 'yes', and teach Emile, in response, to act as if she had said 'yes', not 'no'. In the very paragraph where Rousseau puts forth the radical doctrine that all sexual intercourse, even in marriage, must be based on mutual desire, he states that men must disregard verbal signs of non-consent to read consent in women's looks.

As rapes increase across the United States, but it becomes gradually illegal, state by state, to have intercourse with one's wife against her will, women have particular reason to want their 'nos' taken to mean 'no' and not 'yes', and to want women taught, like men, to say 'no' when they mean 'no'.

It is not hard to see how deliberation is distorted when subordinates say 'yes' ('Yes, boss') when they mean 'no'. The convolutions of mismeaning embedded in men's and women's dance of domination and subordination reveal other layers, and other types of distortion, of which both parties may be unaware, and in which the larger culture is complicit.

It has been the decade of deconstruction, semiotics, and Foucault. As deconstruction picks apart a piece of literature to see what lies behind, as semiotics sees every pause, word, or non-word as a signifier, as Foucault uncovers power in the interstices of every social act, these currents have served as allies, often consciously unwanted, in the feminist enterprise of unmasking, and guarding against, subtle forms of domination.

An important example of this enterprise, on the theoretical plane, is Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon's analysis of the domination implicit in the act of intercourse. Dworkin and MacKinnon suggest that in the average act of sexual intercourse the fact that one person penetrates and the other is penetrated, one thrusts and the other receives, encodes a pattern of domination and
subordination, reinforced in some cases by top versus bottom position, initiator versus initiate, and other reflections or coy reversals of external structures of power. Feminists have brought out the power imbalances inherent in many subtle acts—the clothing the two genders use, hairstyle, makeup, laughter, and attitudes toward food or one's own body.

Women, more than most oppressed groups, have come to learn the covert as well as the overt faces of power. Many women, no matter how active as feminists, have loved their fathers, sons, sometimes their male lovers or husbands. And many men have loved women, sometimes (at least in the modern era) with a strong conscious commitment to creating in the social world, or at least their intimate relations, the equality they perceive 'underneath'. Because this love and commitment to equality are also bound up tightly with conscious and unconscious forms of domination, women have had to begin learning to parse out the confused grammars of love and power.

Sensitivity to subtle forms of power pervaded the egalitarianism and commitment to consensus of the early radical women's movement. It continues today to inspire the National Women's Studies Association's experiments with equalizing power, like its caucuses for constituencies who feel they have a less than equal voice. Mainstream women's organizations share the same concerns. The League of Women Voters from its beginning has made decisions by what the organization calls 'consensus', namely 'agreement among a substantial number of members, representative of the membership as a whole, reached after sustained study and group discussion'. The aim is deliberation, and decision through persuasion. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s state and local branches of the National Organization for Women fought inequalities in power among their members, suggesting in Massachusetts in 1972, for example, a rotating president because 'they didn't want to have a star system'.

Used indiscriminately, practices aimed at ensuring equality and consensus can undermine deliberation, not advance it. We need laboratories, which feminist practice abundantly provides, to assess which forms work and which do not.

---

'DIFFERENCE' AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

To say that feminists can add something new to political theory through their understanding of women's experience does not require believing that women and men are 'essentially' different. It requires only that certain experiences be distributed unequally between men and women. A fairly small difference in experience can become a large difference in self-image and social perception. If one group is dominant, as men are, they typically take pains to avoid the language and images attributed to the subordinates. The subordinate group, on the other hand, is torn between pride in its own language and images and a desire to emulate the dominant group.

Empathy—the quality of being able to put oneself emotionally in another's place—may serve as an example. Women are typically seen, and see themselves, as more empathetic than men. Research on empathy, however, shows gender difference to vary dramatically depending on how empathy is measured. In experimental studies simulating emotional situations, few differences between men and women show up in physiological reactions or reports of feelings of sympathy or concern. But when asked on questionnaires to respond to items such as 'I tend to get emotionally involved with a friend's problems', girls and women score much higher on empathy than do boys and men. The social reputation for difference is as important as any difference in behaviour. For it suggests an alternative model—an ideal type of behaviour valued by the subordinate group.

In some parts of their lives, women and men do have dramatically different experiences. Women give birth, nurse, and are socialized for childrearing. They are far more likely to be raped, battered, and the victims of incest, or to have to plan their lives around the fear of rape. They are more likely to become secretaries, nurses, or elementary school teachers, to have interrupted careers, and to experience poverty. But not every woman has given birth or been raped. Some manage to avoid the pervasive fear of rape. A few arrange job trajectories much like those of men.

In many other respects, men's and women's experiences overlap greatly. Since on many psychological, social, and political measures the means between the two sexes are so close, almost half the men in any group have had a certain 'female' experience or trait more often than half the women. The same is true of women in regard to 'masculine' traits and experiences.

Because socialization to gender is not merely a passive response to punishment and reward but rather the result of an active, engaged building of the personality, and because healthy people tend to like and want to be who they are, children probably value being a boy or a girl long before they know what that means. As children create
themselves, they learn that gender is a salient identifying characteristic and adopt the traits their social milieus associate with women or men. Even in the future, when I expect the significance of gender to diminish greatly, biological sex will continue to be sexy.

Whenever we learn, as adults or children, that certain features of human personality or action are socially salient, we become more conscious of those features, perhaps even exaggerating them in our minds, as we absorb them into our self-image. Social images grow in much the same way. When a distinction makes a difference in a culture, we build those distinctions into schemas, or stories, that explain the world. The mirror of society magnifies emotions and behaviour already enlarged in the mirror of the self.

These magnified distinctions influence our ways of knowing. Ways of knowing associated with women can be scorned as ‘soft’, ways of knowing associated with men praised as ‘hard’. The nature of inquiry itself can become part of an overall pattern of domination. When the subordinate classes fight back, they can expose the power relations inherent in the dominant paradigm. Fighting as women for women’s ways of knowing binds women closer in sisterhood, reinforcing common experience. It also shoots adrenaline into the collective intellectual system, helping to see the world differently, and sometimes more clearly.

Out of this process can come critical intellectual tools. Take Carol Gilligan’s distinction between the ‘male’ emphasis on rights versus the ‘female’ emphasis on relationships. Differences between men and women do appear both at the ‘higher’ level of Kohlberg’s scales of moral development (among the professional classes, women are more likely to appear at a ‘lower’ stage of development) and on Carol Gilligan’s and her colleagues’ more recent measures of orientation to rights and relationships among upper middle-class men and women. In mixed-class populations, these differences do not usually reach statistical significance. But even if there were no differences at all between men and women on these dimensions in actual behaviour, if the differences persisted in social image they would help us understand how one way of looking at moral questions—a ‘different voice’ that stresses relationships rather than rights—could have been passed over in the development of moral theory.

That different voice is by no means unanimously female. Gilligan herself points out that many men also speak with a different voice. But by signalling that the previously overlooked and discredited perspective has been stereotyped as a woman’s perspective and thus can easily be perceived, through the lens of self- and social image, as a woman’s perspective, she not only explains its previous subordination. She also mobilizes to fight for it as a legitimate perspective in its own right. Reading Gilligan’s A Different Voice angers women. It helps explain why whole disciplines have devalued what ‘women’ do, and it gives women the energy to fight back, with their sisters, the next time it happens. As they fight back, the men who also adopt a ‘different voice’ benefit, too. And so, with luck, does the larger human analytic enterprise.

A focus on women’s differences from men goes a long way toward building feminist solidarity. However, for the purpose of changing mainstream—that is, male—practices and ideas, the strategy is double-edged. Any idea should be persuasive in its own right. Harnessing that idea to women’s differences from men assures it the automatic attention given anything related to sex. At the same time, yoking the idea to the age-old ‘war between the sexes’ will work for or against it, depending on the audience. There are costs to such a strategy—in possibly neglecting non-gendered arguments for the idea, in seeming to diminish its scope, in seeming to suggest that the differences between men and women are large, innate, or ineradicable, in eliminating potential audiences, in discounting the experiences of the many, both men and women, whose feelings are not congruent with gendered social expectations, and in tapping emotional sources of intellectual activity that can blind as well as clarify. There are also benefits—in generating the idea in the first place, getting people to think about it, explaining previous denigration, and providing through the connection with gender the language and additional perspectives that help the idea make sense.

In the next decades feminism is bound to be a fertile source of insight not only into its main subject of gender relations, but also into most other human relations that involve inequalities of power or making another’s good one’s own. Regardless of the strategy chosen, feminists need allies when their goal is improving mainstream political practice and thought. In the near future feminists can find allies in the political theorists and empirical political scientists who are newly concerned with the quality of deliberation. And when democratic theorists are in search of provocative and useful new ideas, they can find them in the constantly growing corpus of feminist theory.

Notes
References

On Feminist Political Thought

On Deliberative Democracy

On Gender Differences
Hannah Mather Crocker, ‘Observations on the real Rights of Women’ (1818).
Mary Parker Follet, *Dynamic Administration* (Harper & Brothers, 1940).
Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Harvard University Press, 1982).