

Feminism and Gender Theory: The Return of the State

Véronique Mottier. *Handbook of Political Theory*. 2004. SAGE Publications.

online at: <http://www.omnilogos.com/2011/09/28/feminism-and-gender-theory-the-return-of-the-state/>

Early feminist perspectives within political science have tended to focus primarily on issues such as gender differentials in political representation and participation. Feminist critiques of mainstream political theory have been slower to develop. This could be explained by the dominance of universalistic liberal thought, especially within the Anglo-Saxon, German and French traditions, which leaves little theoretical space for the conceptualization of identity differences. The past two decades however have seen the development of an extensive feminist perspective within political theory, which has set out to rethink fundamental issues such as the nature of power, the boundaries of the political, and the democratization of citizenship and the public sphere. This is not to suggest that feminist political theory constitutes in any way a homogeneous field. Within feminist theory, there are debates and disagreements about most of the above issues, and even about the concept of gender itself.

The analytical distinction between sex and gender has been the subject of much discussion within feminist theory. The concept of gender (understood as the social meanings around 'natural' sex differences) has been the focus of an old and now rather tired debate between essentialist and anti-essentialist views, somewhat resuscitated by the recent repopularization of evolutionist and genetic explanations. Essentialist approaches to gender consider that women are fundamentally different from men, in particular for biological reasons although the label of essentialism has become so unpopular today that few feminists seem comfortable with describing their own position in these terms. Anti-essentialists, often inspired by postmodern ideas, consider gender to be a social and political construction. They insist on the cultural and historical variations and multidimensionality of gender identities, and their imbrication with institutionalized relations of power. Both essentialist and anti-essentialist feminists recognize the importance of sex differences, but the political consequences that the respective theorists draw from these diverge. For essentialists, the fundamental differences between men and women need to be addressed by political action, aiming to reduce inequalities between the genders. For anti-essentialists, on the contrary, the social construction of gender identities itself is identified as 'the problem' and object of study. Consequently, not just sexual inequality, but also sexual differentiation are considered social constructions (Okin, 1991: 67).

However, inequalities of power can neither be reduced to, nor explained by, gender differences alone. Gender is not just about difference between the sexes, but about power. Any convincing analysis of the gender order will therefore need to combine the analysis of gender difference with an account of gender power. The focus of the theorization of links between gender and politics thus shifts to the social and political institutionalization of sex differences. The state has played a central role in this process by regulating the relations between the public and private spheres of social life, as well as the access of citizens to social and political rights and to democratic decision-making. Theorizing the relations between gender and the state is consequently a central aspect of the feminist critique of mainstream political theory. The following sections will explore the feminist rethinking of the state, of the relations between the public and the private spheres, and of citizenship and democratic theory.

Gender Theory and the State

For a long time, feminist theory paid scant attention to the role of the state in gender relations. There are obvious historical reasons for this initial 'state-blindness' of gender analysis. At its inception in the 1970s, the new women's movement was deeply suspicious of mainstream politics and the state, which were seen as fundamentally patriarchic in nature. Many feminists intended to avoid conventional strategies and power games in favour of anti-hierarchical action within new social movements outside of the formal political arena. At the level of practical political action, this critical stance was nevertheless often combined with an appeal to the state, in key areas of feminist struggles such as abortion, pornography, or anti-rape legislation (Petchesky, 1986; Randall, 1998). The analytical consequence of the movement's distrust of mainstream politics was an under-theorization of the role of the state. Since the mid 1980s, there has been

a reevaluation of the central role of the state in the structuration and institutionalization of relations between men and women, and in establishing and policing the frontiers between public and private spheres. Somewhat paradoxically, at a time when the importance of the state itself is eroded by supranational processes, the state has been brought back into feminist theory.

Initially, as Waylen (1998) points out, gender theorists tended to view the state in primarily negative terms. Socialist feminists in particular integrated the oppression of women within the Marxist perspective. They consequently saw the state as an instrument of domination in the hands of the ruling class, and emphasized the importance of the role of women in the reproduction of the workforce within the family for the development of capitalism. Like socialist feminists, radical feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon also conceptualized the liberal state as a monolithic entity which institutionalizes the interests of dominant groups, particularly through the law; only this time the latter were not the bourgeois classes described by Marxist theorists but the category of male citizens. The liberal legal system, mainstream politics and the state were seen as instruments of the subordination of women to men, and of the legitimization of male interests as the general interest. As MacKinnon put it, 'liberal legalism is thus a medium for making male dominance both invisible and legitimate by adopting the male point of view in law at the same time as it enforces that view on society' (1989: 237). Within these approaches, the state was perceived above all as a patriarchal instrument which institutionalizes and reproduces male domination. From the late 1980s, such an understanding of the state has been challenged by a number of alternative perspectives. The latter question, first, whether the impact of the state on gender relations should be conceptualized in negative terms only; and second, whether the state is adequately theorized as a homogeneous actor.

Concerning the first question, a number of analyses of the welfare state promote a far more positive vision of the state. Scandinavian authors such as Drude Dahlerup (1987), Birte Siim (1988), and Helga Hernes (1984; 1987) argue that the welfare state has a positive effect on gender relations, in that it makes for a lessening of financial dependency of women towards men. Liberal authors defend a similarly more benign view, in that they conceptualize the liberal state as a neutral arbiter between groups rather than as an instrument of male domination (see also Waylen, 1998). Other analyses, developed particularly in the Australian, Dutch and Scandinavian context, argue that the state offers scope for the subversion and transformation of gendered power relations. They emphasize the possibilities of institutionalization—and therefore of promotion—of women's interests within the state, either through the action of 'femocrats' (feminist bureaucrats) working from within the state system to empower women, or when the state itself acts in a way to further women's status (Stetson and Mazur, 1995). In this context, an important policy tool has been gender mainstreaming, by which is meant the systematic incorporation of gender concerns into policies rather than as an 'afterthought' or, alternatively, the emphasis on gender issues in specific policies.

The second issue that of the homogeneous nature of the state, is challenged particularly by poststructuralist research. Feminists who draw on poststructuralist (especially Foucauldian) theories argue that it is problematic to consider the state as an homogeneous, unitary entity which pursues specific interests. They consider the state as a plurality of arenas of struggle, rather than as unified actors [see further Chapter 18]. Consequently, poststructuralist analyses of the state introduce less dichotomous perspectives which take into account the local, diverse and dispersed nature of sites of gender power (see, for example, Pringle and Watson, 1992). They consider feminist attempts to define what 'women's interests' might be by authors such as Virginia Sapiro (1981) and Irene Diamond and Nancy Hartsock (1981) as problematic, since these treat as pre-given both the state and the notion of interests. Drawing on poststructuralist theory, R. Pringle and S. Watson point out that the analytical focus needs to shift instead to the discursive practices which construct specific interests, including those by femocrats. Comparative research has similarly led to scepticism towards a vision of the state and its role in structuring gender relations that is too unilateral. Comparative analyses of welfare states suggest that the impact of the state on gender relations varies greatly from one welfare regime to another, and importantly allow for the universalizing of the experience of individual states to be avoided (Sainsbury, 1994; Lewis, 1997; Fraser and Gordon, 1994).

Influenced by poststructuralist, postmodern, and comparative perspectives, current feminist analyses of the state thus usefully challenge the a priori assumption that the state (always or necessarily) acts as an agent of male domination. They increasingly turn away from the theorization of relations between gender and the state in general terms, to focus

instead on the construction of gender within specific state discourses and practices. 1 It is important to recognize that relations between the state and gender are not intrinsically positive or negative. Feminist analyses of the state need to take into account its historical complexity, its variations within different political contexts such as liberal democracy, colonialism or state socialism, and its dynamic relationship to gendered power relations (Waylen, 1998: 7). It is important for feminist analysis to develop instead more sophisticated models which consider the complex, multidimensional and differentiated relations between the state and gender. Such models should recognize that the state can be a positive as well as a negative resource for feminists, and they should emphasize the gendered nature of concepts such as the welfare state or citizenship while also taking into account historical and spatial national variations [see further Chapters 16 and 19].

Public and Private Spheres

Whereas feminist theory has increasingly turned towards the state, there is considerable disagreement as to how precisely to conceptualize the boundaries of the state. As Susan Moller Okin (1991) points out, political science tends to confuse different usages of the terms 'public' and 'private': first, to refer to the distinction between state and society; and second, to refer to the distinction between domestic and non-domestic spheres. The first distinction between state and family is particularly problematic from a feminist point of view: this dichotomy, where everything that relates to the family is considered as private, leads to the exclusion from the conceptual field of political science of a whole series of themes that are, in fact, essential, such as the problem of justice in everyday life, the political dimension of the family, or inequalities between men and women (Okin, 1991). The majority of classic and modern political thinkers (with the exception of Held, Walzer and Sandel) consequently exclude the family from their analyses of political power either explicitly, as do Rousseau, Locke or Hegel, or implicitly, as does John Rawls (Pateman, 1989; Okin, 1991). As Okin notes, this omission is somewhat ironic since the revitalization of modern political theory has in fact coincided with major changes in the family, as well as in wider social relations of gender and their challenge by feminist theory and practice.

The new feminist movement of the 1970s made the contestation of the traditional separation between the spheres into a central issue of struggle, represented in the slogan 'the personal is political.' There have been many controversies about the exact meaning of this slogan. It was originally directed mainly at male socialist or radical activists, reminding them that the theoretical focus on capital and labour and the extension of the notion of politics ignored the gender inequalities at home (Phillips, 1998). For some feminists at the time, it referred to the desire to free women by suppressing the family, since the family was considered to be the source of the oppression of women. Nowadays, most feminists reject this extreme position, while recognizing the important impact of unequal power relations within the family. However, their 'solution' is not to abolish the family but rather to democratize it. In so doing, they recognize the relevancy of the existence of two separate spheres. The disagreements bear on the nature of these spheres, as well as on the relations between them. In Okin's (1991) work for example, the numerous inequalities of the private sphere are attributed to the structuration, by the state, of the relations between men and women within the family. The labour market and the economic market have been profoundly gendered and cannot be understood adequately without taking into account their grounding in male domination and the female responsibility for the domestic sphere. Consequently, she argues that the democratization of the public sphere is not possible without the prior democratization of the private sphere. In order to render possible the democratization of the private sphere, we need to acquire a better grasp of the ways in which the private sphere is shaped by the public sphere. Despite her critical view on the interdependency of the spheres, Okin thinks that it is important to maintain the distinction between the private and the public. Quite a few women's rights such as the right to abortion, for example, require a right to 'privacy' in order to be exercised; that is, the respect of a sphere within which the individual has the right to decide freely, Okin (1991) argues. Anne Phillips (1991) similarly conceptualizes the public and private spheres as interdependent, but nevertheless distinct. For her, 'the private is political' means primarily that it is necessary to extend the notion of 'the political.' For political science in particular, this means that it is necessary to integrate the private sphere into the analysis, rather than to restrict the analytical focus to the public sphere, as traditional political scientists tend to do.

In order to show the necessity of taking into account the private sphere, Phillips focuses on the concept of democracy. She argues that to conceptualize democratic participation without taking into account the constraints of the private

sphere entails too narrow a view of democracy. She criticizes the traditional approaches to democracy for neglecting the gendered nature of power relations around love, sex and economics within the family. The inequalities within the family are as relevant to issues of social justice as inequalities in the public sphere, Phillips argues. Similarly to Okin, but also to arguments about the private sphere developed by theorists of participative democracy such as Carole Pateman (1989), Phillips contends that the democratization of the public sphere—understood as the higher participation of women in this sphere—is impossible without the prior democratization of the private sphere. In this sense, the democratization of the private sphere is not only a means for achieving the goals of active political citizenship, but also a value in itself. Phillips thus argues for a conceptualization of democracy which includes power relations in the private sphere.

Whereas feminists agree on the necessity of democratizing the private sphere, they disagree as to the political solutions. Pateman, for example, argues for the abandoning of the distinction between public and private spheres in favour of more politicization of the private sphere. Other authors think that it is essential to maintain clear boundaries between the two spheres. Jean Bethke Elshtain (1981), in particular, vehemently rejects Pateman's position. She considers the assimilation of both spheres to be 'totalitarian' since it would not leave any areas of life outside of politics. According to Elshtain, the liberalist rigid separation of the spheres leads to the removal from the political sphere of family values, solidarity and care. The public sphere becomes a space regulated only by the principle of individualistic, rational pursuit of egoistic self-interests. Consequently, the political sphere becomes emptied of its more central values. Elshtain thus argues that the application of principles of the public sphere to the private sphere let loose the most negative tendencies of the modern world. The family, she argues, should be protected against the destructive effects of politicization by rigorous maintenance of clear boundaries between the two spheres.

For Phillips (1991), on the contrary, the idea of a private sphere independent from the political sphere is meaningless. She points out that relations within the private sphere are regulated by the state, economics, and the subordination of women. Consequently, 'these relations are already politicized, whether we want it or not' (1991: 106). Despite this disagreement, Phillips rejoins Elshtain in arguing for maintaining a separation between the public and the private, but for different reasons: whereas Elshtain argues for the protection of family values from the intervention of the state, Phillips bases her argument on the necessity to preserve areas within which the principle of individual decision and privacy is maintained, and she uses here the example of abortion. On this point, Phillips's position is close to that of Okin and Iris Marion Young (1987; see also Petchesky, 1986: 108). However, Phillips goes one step further than Okin in arguing for the degendering of the distinction public/private: she argues for detachment of the definition of the spheres from the definition of gender roles. In other words, the distinction between public and private spheres should be detached from gender differences, and based instead on the criterion of the right to privacy.

Both Phillips and Young build on Habermasian, deliberative theories to advocate retaining the concept of the public sphere, where personal identities are shed to arrive at democratic decision-making through rational deliberation. Most feminist theory has currently moved towards similar arguments for maintaining some sort of demarcation between the two spheres while recognizing that the boundaries are relevant to mechanisms of exclusion of women from politics, and that normative political theory can bring questions of justice and freedom to the domestic sphere. However, in contrast to Pateman's, Phillips's, Young's or Okin's positions on this point, the question of whether these spheres are separate, interdependent, or identical needs to be problematized in itself. As Terrell Carver (1996) points out, these two spheres are not simply pre-given, and the task of political theory is not just to theorize their relations. These are sociopolitical constructs, the frontiers of which are regulated by the state. Joining others such as Robert Connell (1990), Judith Squires (1994b), or Chantal Mouffe (1992), Carver draws the conclusion that it is precisely the process of construction of these spheres and their respective frontiers that needs examining since it is there that power issues operate.

Carver (1996) further emphasizes that the traditional structuration of the two spheres also has consequences for men—a point which feminist theorists tend to neglect. As he puts it somewhat provocatively, 'gender is not a synonym for women.' Feminists have routinely criticized traditional political theory for marginalizing themes conventionally associated with femininity—such as sexuality, the care of children, or reproduction—to the private sphere. As Carver points out, issues such as male sexualities, the reproductive functions of men, or the role of men in the education and care-giving of children have also been excluded both from political theory and from political debate.

Citizenship and Democratic Theory

Much of feminist theory has focused on the absence of women from political theory. This theme was first addressed by authors such as Okin (1979), Elshtain (1981), Pateman (1983) and Arlene Saxonhouse (1985; see also Mottier, Sgier and Ballmer-Cao, 2000). Their pioneering work demonstrated that modern political theory neglects to address the subordinated position attributed to women in classical theories of democracy. The emergence of modern liberal democracy introduced a universalistic political discourse which claimed to be indifferent to gender or other identity differences. Mainstream political theory consequently considers citizenship as a universal concept. Democratic rights of social and political participation apply to each citizen without regard for his or her race, religion or gender. Feminist authors have shown the central premises of universalistic conceptions of citizenship to be flawed due to gender bias. As the work of Vicky Randall (1998), Ruth Lister (1997) and Sylvia Walby (1994) illustrates, women have been either excluded, or differentially included, in citizenship.

Walby's historical analysis, for example, demonstrates the gendered nature of citizenship through a critical assessment of the work of T. H. Marshall (1950), which is often taken to be the starting point for modern debates on the question. According to Marshall, different types of citizenship developed successively, with civic rights in the eighteenth century, political rights in the nineteenth and social rights in the twentieth. Analysing the history of citizenship in the United Kingdom and the US, Walby questions Marshall's thesis. For example, up to the 1920s, in contrast to men, British and American women had not yet acquired the majority of civic and political rights. In addition, the political rights were acquired by women before the civic rights, contradicting Marshall's sequential model. In other words, as Walby demonstrates, the three types of citizenship rights described by Marshall have followed different historical trajectories for different social groups. The conception of a unique model of citizenship therefore reveals a gender bias which is also present in the work of later authors who built on Marshall's work, such as Turner and Mann. As Walby points out, these authors similarly put the emphasis on the importance of social class in the history of citizenship and the formation of the nation-state, but neglect other factors such as gender or race.

In this respect Walby joins other feminist critics of the concept of citizenship, such as Lister (1990) and Pateman (1989), for whom the fact that women have not been treated in any democracy as full and equal citizens means that 'democracy has never existed' (1989: 372). However, Walby also points out an important contradiction in their work: on the one hand, authors such as Lister and Pateman question the gendered nature of the frontiers between the public and the private while insisting on the importance of female values and roles (Pateman, 1991) and on the recognition by the public sphere of the work done by women in the private sphere (Lister, 1990). On the other hand, these authors propose as a solution to the domestic exploitation of women their entry into the public sphere, particularly in the labour market. Feminist theorists have been instrumental in demonstrating the particularistic rather than universal nature of citizenship. They reveal that liberal democratic theory has been based on the implicit assumption that 'political action and masculinity were congruent, whereas political action and femininity were antithetical,' as K. Jones and A. G. Jonasdottir (1988: 2) put it. They also take issue with the liberalist claim to universality for asking subordinated social groups such as women to subordinate their own 'partial' needs to the 'general' interest (Young, 1990). Feminist perspectives on citizenship diverge, however, as to the ways in which they conceptualize citizenship, the theoretical foundations of these conceptualizations, and the conclusions to be drawn from the questioning of the universality of citizenship. Perhaps most importantly, they diverge in their relationship to liberalist thought. There has been an important move over the last two decades within feminist theories of citizenship 'to recuperate the liberal project' (Squires, 1994a: 62). Authors such as Pateman (1989), Susan James (1992), Phillips (1993) and Mouffe (1992) explore the affinities between liberal and feminist conceptions of citizenship. Feminist theorizations of political citizenship and the democratization of the public sphere have consequently been dominated by debates between liberal feminist theorists and their critics. Amongst the latter, maternalist and Marxist perspectives have been particularly prominent in the 1980s, but more recently the focus of debate has shifted to poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of liberal understandings of citizenship.

For feminist Marxists, the notion of individual rights is an illusion which serves to mask the capitalist and patriarchal foundations of the liberal state, as well as its domination by a male elite. They insist particularly on the necessity of

recognizing the value of 'reproductive work' accomplished by women. However, as Mary Dietz (1992) points out, the theme of citizenship is highly underdeveloped in the Marxist critique of capitalism and representative democracy. Marxist theorists tend to reduce feminist politics to the revolutionary struggle against the state—seen as the principal source of the oppression of women—and to reduce women to their reproductive functions.

'Maternalist' thinkers also reject the liberal contractual conception of citizenship. They place the emphasis on the relational dimension of social life. Drawing on the work of Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Carol Gilligan (1982), maternalists argue that the private sphere, in particular the family, is ruled by a relational morality, an 'ethics of care' anchored in mothering activities. As Sara Ruddick (1980) argues, women who are mothers have developed capacities, values and moral judgements that are both little recognized and contrast with the dominant bureaucratic and technological rationality of the modern public sphere. According to maternalists, women bring to the public sphere these relational capacities, including a respect for others and a care for their well-being. They also bring a different use of power since the aim of ethics of care is to empower others, not to control them. The public sphere, on the contrary, is seen to be ruled by a masculinist ethics of justice, founded on individual rights.

For maternalist theorists, the ethics of care is morally superior to the individualist values that dominate the public sphere. They see in the ethics of care of the private sphere a possible source for rethinking both morality in the public sphere and the model of liberal citizenship. Consequently, maternalist theorists such as Ruddick (1980; 1989) and Elshtain (1982) argue for an integration into the public sphere of relational skills such as listening skills, emotions, and recognition of others' needs and vulnerability as a basis for democratic deliberation (Ruddick, 1980; 1989; Elshtain, 1982; Held, 1990). Women's experiences from the private sphere are thus taken as a normative model for behaviour in the public sphere, where women's capacities for love and care for others come to be seen as a model to be emulated by others, and as a potential basis for public morality. Elshtain (1982) calls for a 'social feminism' as an alternative to the 'amoral statecraft' of the modern bureaucratic state. In her critical development of maternalist theory, Selma Sevenhuijsen (1998: 20) shares this emphasis on the revaluation of caring activities. However, she emphasizes that social practices of care do not always spring from worthy motives but can also be driven by the desire for control over others, or from 'Christian guilt.' As Sevenhuijsen points out, 'bad' motives can lead to 'good' care, while a 'good' motive, such as attentiveness to vulnerability, is no guarantee of good care but can lead to paternalism or undue protection.

Maternal thinking has been the object of violent disagreements within feminist theory. MacKinnon (1989), for example, rejects its basic premise, arguing that women's caring 'instincts' are in fact the consequences of the socialization of women into their subordinate roles, and serve to sustain male domination. Martha Nussbaum, while sympathetic to the emphasis on care and the possible role of trust and understanding in our lives, warns that 'women are often valued as creatures of care and sympathy. Often they are devalued for the same characteristics' (1999: 13). The most systematic and influential critique of maternal thinking has been formulated by Dietz (1992). Dietz criticizes maternalists for committing the same errors as liberal thinkers: first, by transforming a historical model of female identity into a universal and ahistorical one; and second, by reproducing the same rigid distinction between the public and the private as liberal approaches to citizenship. As Dietz points out, there is no reason to think that the experience of mothering leads necessarily to democratic practices. Values that are virtues when taking care of vulnerable children in the private sphere are not necessarily a good model for political interactions between equal citizens in the public sphere. She consequently pleads in favour of a conception of citizenship that would resist the 'temptation of womanism' which attributes a superior moral nature to women (1992: 393). As Dietz puts it, 'such a premise would posit as a starting-point precisely what a democratic attitude must deny—that one group of citizens' voices is generally better, more deserving of attention, more worthy of emulation, more moral, than another's' (1992: 393). Rather than a withdrawal into the assumed values of the private sphere or interest-group politics, Dietz emphasizes the active engagement of women in the public sphere.

Forceful as these criticisms have been, it would be premature to assume the demise of maternal thinking within feminist theory. Despite its contested nature, its influence remains felt, particularly in feminist analyses of the welfare state and in ecofeminist thought. However, current feminist critiques of citizenship tend to engage more explicitly with liberal thought, and to reappropriate critically some of its key elements.

Pateman's critical rethinking of citizenship operates through a critique of theories of liberal democracy on the one hand and of theories of participatory democracy on the other. 'Feminism, liberalism and democracy (that is, a political order in which citizenship is universal, the right of each adult individual member of the community) share a common origin,' Pateman argues.

Feminism, a general critique of social relationships of sexual domination and subordination and a vision of a sexually egalitarian future, like liberalism and democracy, emerges only when individualism, or the idea that individuals are by nature free and equal to each other, has developed as a universal theory of social organization. (1989: 373ff)

Similarly to Walby, Pateman (1983; 1989) emphasizes the necessity for feminist theories of citizenship to rethink the links between the private and public spheres. She develops this argument through a rereading of classical and contemporary theories of democracy, in which citizenship is assumed to be universal. The problem with classical political theories of democracy is, in her view, that only individuals of male gender are considered to have individual rights and liberties. Social contract theories such as those of Locke and Rousseau, for example, are founded on the subordination of women to men. As Pateman notes, contemporary democratic theory sees no contradiction between universal citizenship on the one hand and the exclusion of women from equal political participation, their relegation to the private sphere, and their subordination to men on the other. For theories of liberal democracy, social inequalities are in any case irrelevant to democratic citizenship. Such a view predominates in analyses of citizenship, including in those that recognize that democracy does not concern only the state, but also the organization of society (for example, Barber, 1984). However, most authors continue to consider relations between men and women in society as part of private life, and consequently do not integrate a gender dimension in their theories. Pateman argues that it is important to reconceptualize the division between the private and the public sphere and to raise questions about the implications of that division for democratic theory. In her view, it is impossible to democratize the public sphere whether through equality of chances as promoted by liberalism or through participative citizenship which includes all citizens—without a radical transformation of the links between men and women in the private sphere. 'Democratic ideals and politics have to be put into practice in the kitchen, the nursery and the bedroom,' Pateman writes (1989: 382).

Other authors such as Young and Seyla Benhabib draw on liberalist thought to develop deliberative models of democracy. Benhabib (1992) builds on Habermas's and Hannah Arendt's analyses of the public sphere to emphasize the necessity of democratizing public debate and opening access to it, while at the same time criticizing these authors for paying little attention to the exclusion of women from that sphere. Although Benhabib is in favour of maintaining some division between the spheres, she takes issue with Arendt for conceptualizing this separation in overly rigid terms. She also criticizes Habermas for operating a distinction between public norms of justice and private values, thereby running the risk of reinstating the separation between the two that has been at the origin of the exclusion of women. Benhabib (1992), similarly to Joan Landes (1995), argues for a Habermasian model of public debate while rejecting the idea of an abstract universal public, a rejection that allows 'differences' between men's and women's experiences to be taken into account instead.

Like Pateman, Young and Benhabib, Dietz (1992) also finds her critique of the gendered nature of citizenship on a critical reading of liberal theories, based especially on the American political context. She is, however, more hostile towards liberal perspectives. Whereas Pateman reproaches liberal theories for their relative indifference towards social inequalities, including those between men and women, Dietz's critique is more radical: she argues that liberalism and gendered concepts of citizenship are fundamentally incompatible. She thus joins other feminist critics for whom the central themes of liberalism—the citizen who has rights and pursues his own interests in a capitalist and competitive society—do not allow for the adequate conceptualization of interrelations or relations of dependency between individuals, either in the political or in the family spheres. Dietz shares the views of Pateman and Walby concerning the necessity of reconceptualizing the links between the public and the private, and of rethinking the distinction between the spheres. She also emphasizes the importance of citizenship as 'a continuous activity and a good in itself, not as a momentary engagement (or a socialist revolution) with an eye to a final goal or a societal arrangement,' calling for a 'feminist revitalization' of citizenship (1992: 392).

Mouffe (1992) similarly founds her conception of citizenship on a critique as well as a critical reappropriation of liberalism. However, Mouffe's project of 'plural democracy' also draws strongly on postmodern and poststructuralist arguments. Indeed, Mouffe adopts an anti-essentialist position towards citizenship, emphasizing the social and political construction of gender identities. Certain feminists fear that anti-essentialist positions limit the possibilities for political action and mobilization around women's identity. For Mouffe, on the contrary, the critique of essentialist identities is in fact a precondition for a truly feminist politics. The most urgent task in her view is to recognize the process of social construction through which sex difference has acquired such importance as a structuring factor of social relations of subordination. According to Mouffe, it is precisely within these processes that the real power relations operate in society. Therefore, a perspective that focuses only on the consequences of sex difference whether 'equality of treatment' means that women and men should be treated differently or the same is meaningless in her eyes.

Mouffe's anti-essentialism leads her to criticize feminists who primarily promote the revalorization of female values, such as (although coming from different perspectives) Pateman or Elshtain. For Mouffe, as for Judith Butler (1990), such a position is problematic, as it assumes the existence of homogeneous identities such as 'men' and 'women.' Mouffe does not criticize only the essentialist outlook of such a position; she also shares the scepticism of Dietz towards the assumed link—especially by maternalist thinkers—between maternal values and democratic practices. Mouffe also criticizes both Pateman's project of a 'sexually differentiated citizenship,' which argues for the revalorization through the public sphere of typically female activities that are usually relegated to the private sphere, and Young's 'group-differentiated citizenship.' Contrary to Pateman and Young, Mouffe thinks that the solution is not to make gender or other group characteristics relevant to the concept of citizenship, but on the contrary, to decrease their importance. The project of radical and democratic citizenship that she proposes implies a conception of citizenship which is neither gendered nor gender-neutral, based on a real equality and liberty of all citizens. She proposes, on the contrary, to focus on political issues and claims and not on presumably fixed and essential gender identities. Accordingly, the distinction between the private and the public spheres needs to be redefined from case to case, according to the type of political demands, and not in a fixed and permanent way. Similarly to Nancy Fraser (1998), Mouffe argues for the importance of coalition building. Rather than seeking to define the interests of 'women,' the feminist movement should seek strategic alliances with other social groups to defend together their political claims regarding specific issues.

From an anti-essentialist perspective, the a priori categorization of certain issues as relevant to either gender—men or women—is in fact problematic. While emphasizing an anti-essentialist understanding of the category of women, feminist political theory has at times been guilty of essentializing the category of men. As Carver (1996) points out, the theorization of masculinity is crucial not only for understanding the origins of gender inequalities but also for identifying the possibilities for change, which would be minimal if we stop at the idea that men are always and necessarily only oppressors. Feminist authors tend to conceptualize the citizen within traditional political theory as simultaneously degendered and male. Although Carver agrees that the subject of traditional political theory is certainly 'not a woman,' he points out that what is degendered cannot at the same time be male. He further criticizes feminist theorists for being inconsistent. With respect to female identity, theorists such as Susan Mendus and Phillips share his anti-essentialist view (contrary to others such as Walby and the maternalist thinkers, who consider the female body as an essential component of gender identity). But when it comes to theorizing masculinity, Carver argues, even anti-essentialist feminist theorists fall back upon a 'crypto-biological' and homogenizing essentialist perspective. Indeed, men are defined primarily through their lack of capacity to bear children. As Carver points out, recent writings on masculinity show how problematic it is to treat the dominant and stereotypical representations of masculinity as a universal model of gender identity. Such writings also indicate the need to analyse the construction of masculinity critically. Drawing on the postmodern theories of Donna Haraway and Butler, Carver thus defends a multidimensional theorization of gender identities both female and male. An adequate theorization needs to take into account the multiple component parts and forms of these identities, including those aspects that are marginalized with respect to dominant gender identity constructions (such as sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity), he argues.

The postmodern theoretical move towards the dissolution of essentialist understandings of identity, as exemplified by Mouffe and Carver, has been challenged by black and postcolonial feminist analyses. These take issue with this move for also dissolving race and therefore analytically marginalizing racism (Mohanty, 1992). However, a false universalism of gender is also problematic. As Butler puts it, 'identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative,

and as such, exclusionary' (1992: 15ff). The very category of the universal is grounded in an ethnocentric bias. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1992) points out, in order to make gender visible, feminist theory again runs the risk of making categories of race and class invisible (see also Crenshaw, 1989). While placing similar stress on difference and the centrality of coalition building, Mohanty (1992) importantly emphasizes the need to think through the issue of 'difference' in feminist cross-cultural analyses, and to contextualize and historicize relations of gender power and political agency.

Concluding Remarks

Feminist perspectives have importantly exposed the false universalism of much of contemporary political theory. In doing so, they have operated a theoretical shift from an initial emphasis on politics of identity towards the affirmation of a politics of difference, especially since the 1990s. Whereas much of feminist activism has aimed to increase the inclusion of women and 'women's issues' into the sphere of practical politics, the theoretical move away from essentialist understandings of the identity category of 'women' and 'women's issues,' as well as the increasing recognition of the need for cross-cultural and historicized understandings of 'women's experience,' has produced suspicion towards the universality inherent in feminist political theory itself, especially of the categories of gender and gender oppression. Black and postcolonial feminist perspectives have been instrumental in questioning the universality of gender struggles, while poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives have offered theoretical tools for critically rethinking feminist politics. On a more critical note, despite an awareness of the need to avoid over-universalizing Western political experiences and institutions, it should be recognized that feminist political theory is still paying too little attention to postcolonial contexts and states (Rai and Lievesley, 1996).

As Phillips puts it, the recent shift from an emphasis on identity to difference has 'moved feminism beyond the question of women's exclusion/ inclusion to a less gender-specific set of issues associated with homogeneity/heterogeneity, sameness/diversity, and universality/difference' (1998: 15). Against this backdrop, identity differences come to be seen in positive terms, rather than as impediments towards political mobilization. Indeed, the affirmation of group difference acts as a possible platform for political action (Young, 1990; Mendus, 1992). However, feminist theory is not limited to providing tools for rethinking 'women's issues' or the role of women in practical politics, important though these tasks are. More fundamentally, feminist political theory transforms the ways in which we think about central issues within political theory, including the state, the relations between public and private spheres, citizenship, and other core aspects of democratic theory.

In particular, feminist theory has expanded the notions of power and the political. On this point, feminist political theory has operated a double move over the past few decades. First, it has extended the notion of the political to sites of power outside of the formal arena of politics and key institutions of the public sphere such as the state, to include family life and sexuality as sites of gender inequality and construction of gender identities. Recent feminist political theory has thus renewed earlier concerns with sexuality and gender. Early feminist theorists such as Kate Millett (1970) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) emphasized the central role of sexuality and reproduction in gender relations of power, thereby extending the boundaries of the political. At the level of practical politics, the politicization of sexuality was correspondingly central to an important part of feminist political claims, such as the issues of contraception, sexual violence, pornography, incest and sexual harassment. Thus, feminist discourse endeavoured to introduce the politics of sex in the political arena and often succeeded (see Carver and Mottier, 1998). Later feminist theorists have tended to shift the focus to relations of power around the economy and the state. Feminist debate on relations between the public and the private have, as we have seen, tended to move in recent years towards an argument for maintaining some separation between the two spheres. Current trends in the area of biotechnologies and reproductive technologies, combined with the increasing influence of poststructuralist and postmodern theories, have again put sexuality at the centre of feminist analysis and practice. The broadening of the concept of democracy and power to include relations in the private sphere, promoted by many feminist theorists, is amongst the major contributions of gender theory.

This is not to say that conventional sites of politics are of secondary importance to feminist theorists. Rather, the emphasis placed upon them varies depending on the different theoretical strands. Liberal feminists such as Pateman, Phillips and Young in particular argue for what Phillips (1995) has termed a 'politics of presence,' involving greater

representation of women in conventional political sites. In contrast, postmodern authors such as Mouffe tend to privilege instead a broader notion of politics, aiming to make gender less significant to models of citizenship (see also Nash, 1998).

The second key move in recent feminist political theory is a renewed interest in the role of the state in regulating gender relations. As we have seen, feminist theorizations of the state have in recent years tended to move away from generalizing theories of the state to an increasing focus on the analysis of discursive practices which construct gender within specific state policies. They explore the ways in which politics produces gendered subjects and institutionalizes gender relations, as well as the ways in which gender produces politics. Feminist analyses of such discursive processes importantly explore struggles over meanings, without reducing politics to its discursive aspects only.

There is a certain irony in the return of the state within feminist theory just as its importance in the structuration of gender relations may currently be decreasing as a result of transnational processes. This is not to say that the state does not remain a crucial actor in the structuration of gender relations. Rather, the effects of current changes in the role of the state resulting from processes of globalization signal the need to take into account the importance of alternative agents for understanding the reproduction as well as transformation of current gender relations. From the focus on the effects of states on gender relations, current feminist research is therefore increasingly exploring the impact of global arenas such as the global political economy and international relations on gender relations, gender identifications, and gender mobilizations (for example, Elshtain, 1987; Enloe, 1989; Peterson, 1992; Sylvester, 1994; Steans, 1998). The feminist rethinking of the relations between states and the international arena further contributes to the move away from what Christine Sylvester (1993) terms 'Western feminist narcissism.'

In his much-quoted outline of the future of political theory, John Dunn (1996) recently argued that political theory needs to be more historical and more contextualized; it needs to be more engaged with the world, with issues of oppression and human misery; it needs to become more cosmopolitan, to consider consequences of growing global interdependence and to propose a moral vision. Beyond the disagreements and debates between different feminist perspectives, given its emphasis on historicized and contextualized analysis, its focus on 'real-world' inequalities, its intensifying dialogue with black and postcolonial critiques, its increasing attention to supranational processes, and its moral critique of universalistic models of democratic representation, justice and redistribution, feminist political theory has much to offer to political theory as a whole.