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Postscript: Feminist Revisions of Political Thought

Susan Bruce and Katherine Smits

Women's voices and perspectives are conspicuously absent from the canon of western political thought. As it is taught in universities all over the world, as it is represented in textbooks and as it shapes the intellectual scope of political ideas, that canon includes very few texts either written by women or addressing their political status: Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* are notable exceptions. A broader view might stretch to include Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* and Olympe de Gouges's *Declaration of the Rights of Woman*, but even these are usually relegated to the margins of western political thought. All of these texts are discussed in this collection which locates them as central to the development of a trajectory of thinking about women's political and social claims, expressed not only in political and philosophical works, but also in novels and poems. We believe that feminism changes the way we think about politics. Feminism broadens our recognition of the spaces where politics emerges: not just in philosophical and polemical texts, but also in the political dimension of the fantastical, the fictional and the poetic. Politics arises wherever power relations, domination and subordination are addressed, and wherever claims to freedom and equality and rights are made – that is, in the public sphere, in civil society, in the home, in the family and in the bedroom. The second-wave feminist claim: 'the personal is political' aims not so much, as critics have suggested, to break down all barriers between public and private life, but rather to demonstrate that power inequalities must also be addressed in that sphere of life we call private.

Women's voices have been largely absent from political thought because women themselves have been, until the last 100 years or so, restricted to the private sphere in western societies. Their experiences and concerns have

been identified with the household and the family, rather than public life, and deemed outside the proper subject of political discourse. This exclusion of women from the public, and their consequent legal and civil subordination, has until the twentieth century been consistently legitimized by political thinkers across a range of philosophical perspectives. In the classical Aristotelian origins of western political ideas about gender, women are confined to household concerns and defined in terms of their reproductive biology.¹ In the contractualist theory of early modern political thinkers, individuals in the state of nature freely agree to enter into civil society and the state, and yet once there are assumed to be male: as Carole Pateman has argued, women are taken to have entered into subordinating sexual contracts in the state of nature, prior to society and politics.² The authors in this collection respond to and challenge this extraordinarily consistent dismissal of women from public life and concerns. The presence of power relations in private life and the difficulties in clearly separating private life from public are a recurring theme in these essays – expressed in anxieties over women's dress, their bodies, their occupation of space and the social relations in which they engage. The protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is driven to madness by her confinement in her bedroom. Other women writers have insisted that the personal and familial dimensions of women's experience must be legitimate matters for public discourse: in Anne Bradstreet's and Adrienne Rich's poetry, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, where the title character claimed the right to record the experiential terms of her life in her own passionate voice and in Virginia Woolf's life writing. In the more overtly polemical terms of her analysis of 'the feminine mystique', Betty Friedan urges American women to recognize that their sense of malaise and dissatisfaction was not individual and personal, but rather shared and political.

Feminist writers have insisted on women's rights to participate in mainstream civic life. Mary Astell questions the separation of public and private sphere concerns and values in the early modern period, arguing that the same standards of liberty and right that apply in the public should apply in the private, to the women confined in that sphere. Olympe de Gouges chooses the revolutionary moment to argue for the equality of women. Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill insist on women's rights and capacity to participate in public discourse. Nazira Zeineddine's objections to enforced veiling reflect the view that these restrictions on dress are aimed at enforcing privacy upon women even as they

move through the public. But some have dealt with the problem by imagining or recounting quite different civic publics, occupied by women and animated by their concerns. Mary Wortley Montagu and Rokeya Hussain describe or imagine women-only spaces and worlds, arguing that social relations and discourse within them are public and political in their aims and concerns. In yet another feminist reinterpretation of public and political space (which we might compare to *The Yellow Wallpaper*), Luisa Valenzuela adopts the female narrator's bed as the central viewpoint and her bedroom as the stage for the drama of nationalist imaginary in her *Bedside Manners*.

The division of public and private reflects another which is central to western thinking: that between the rational mind and the non-rational body. This distinction in western political philosophy originates in Platonic Idealism, and the association of politics and civic life with rationality has been a persistent theme in the canon of western political thought. From the classical origins of political theory, through Christian thinking and into the modern period, women were regarded as irrational, determined and limited always by their reproductive biology; unable to participate in rational processes of deliberation, self-improvement and – for early liberals – capital accumulation. To define women as irrational was to exclude them from the public sphere. Some of the texts in this collection explicitly challenge the claim of female irrationality. This is suggested first by Christine de Pizan, who argues that women are intellectually equal to men, and is central for Wollstonecraft, Mill and Nazira Zeineddine, all of whom insist upon women's rationality and consequent capacity for self-cultivation and self-determination.

Other feminists have focused on challenging the assumption that politics is concerned only with rational deliberation and processes and not with embodied experience. In early modern political thought, the control of bodies and physical violence by rational political arrangements and institutions underpinned Hobbes's argument that fear of others legitimized the handing over of absolute power to the state. Feminist authors contest women's alleged irrationality and the exclusion of a full-range of bodily experience – not just fear of death – from political meaning, exposing the political significance of embodied experience by pointing out men's efforts to control women's bodies. Such an agenda, some of them (such as Zeineddine) have claimed, lies not only behind the injunction to veil, but also behind the control of women's sexuality more broadly. Mill argues that men feel

empowered to force sex upon women and use it to control them, and Andrea Dworkin develops a sustained argument along these lines, arguing that the act of sex itself imposes, maintains and reinscribes women's subordination. But feminist arguments about the relationship between sex and power are complex: many also suggest that sexual self-assertion is an important aspect of self-determination and liberation, as we see in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Like Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, this text reminds us that the deployment of sex as an instrument of control is also often shaped by racial politics. But, it also suggests that freedom and autonomy are the goals – and rights – of women as embodied human beings. Women experience their bodies, Simone de Beauvoir argues, not only partly through social norms, but also through their own autonomous choices.

Whether sex is seen to constitute only the imposition of male control, or is held to operate as a field of self-expression that may be seized by women, it is a central feminist claim that the control of women's bodies and their own participation in this control is a fundamental aspect of politics and regimes of power. This expands our understanding of who the subjects and objects of political power are – i.e. who wields political power, and upon whom? Throughout the history of western political thought, rulers, and later the state, have been assumed to exercise political power. The emerging concept of the individual in the early modern period meant that individual rights and liberties had to be reconciled with state power (wrested from the Church); this was the project of social contract theory. Until the nineteenth century, the state was assumed to be the key actor in politics, negotiating with and acting upon individuals, the Church, social groups and classes. Marx's analysis of class relations has been widely recognized as a major challenge to this assumption, but so too were the feminist arguments that emerged at around the same time. Feminism, of course, opposes state control over women, but it sees the source of that control in the power of men as a class and patriarchy as an ideological and social system. Moreover (as Marx also pointed out in a different context), political power is exerted over minds, as well as bodies. Because ideology, values and ideas shape women's consciousness as well as that of men, feminists have pointed to the way in which patriarchy exerts control over the very minds of its objects, turning them at least with some success into willing supporters of male domination. Several of the authors in this collection, from Astell in the seventeenth century to Rich and Dworkin

in the twentieth, point to ideology's role in producing women's complicity in their own subordination.

Feminist authors since the nineteenth century have recognized that the subordination of women is connected and related to that of other social groups, groups constituted along racial, class and sexual lines, among other aspects of identity. In their political activism, first-wave feminists like the Suffragettes (with whom this collection began) compared the situation of women to that of slaves. They were inspired by the movement to abolish slavery – the most influential social reform movement of the first half of the nineteenth century – and also by socialism's promise of justice and equality. Both the slavery comparison and the socialist context are explicit in the work of Anna Wheeler; Mill also compares women to slaves. Later in the century, as leftist movements gathered strength, socialist feminists located women's rights in the context of broader economic inequalities and the capitalist system that sustained them. Clara Zetkin argues that women's social and political positions could not be addressed independently, and that capitalism subordinated women differently depending on class. The two African-American authors in this collection, Hurston and Jacobs demonstrate that women's subordination and sexual exploitation are the instruments of racist as well as patriarchal ideology, which deforms both the dominant white society and African-American communities, and against which women of colour struggle to assert themselves. In colonized societies, women's claims for equality and justice were part of a complex response to imperial rule and to processes of modernization, as we see here in the work of Hussain and Zeineddine. Contemporary political theory's recognition of intersectionality – the analysis of power relations in terms of the complex social axes of domination and subordination – reflects feminist arguments that women's experience of subordination is shaped also by their race, ethnicity, class and sexuality.

Finally, feminism has changed not only the way in which we theorize politics, it has also changed the ways in which we think about the relationship between political theory and lived experience. Most of the authors represented in this collection were not philosophers – but all, from philosophers, through housewives to former slaves, saw themselves as speaking on behalf of women, drawing their arguments from women's experience, and aiming to change that experience for the better. Feminism's contribution to political theory is a work in progress – young authors and thinkers continue to speak and write about women's

subordination wherever, and in whatever form, it is found. But feminism's most fundamental achievement has been to insist that all political theories, as well as all social practices, ethical principles and institutions confront the same, crucial, question: what are their consequences for the experience of the women, in all their diversity, who live under them?