

CHAPTER 5

FEMINIST THEORY AND THE CANON OF POLITICAL THOUGHT

LINDA ZERILLI

FEMINIST approaches to the canon of political theory are characterized by deep ambivalence. On the one hand, canonical authors have mostly dismissed women as political beings in their own right, casting them instead as mere appendages to citizen man. If the citizen is a gendered category based on women's exclusion, then it would appear that the canon is more or less bankrupt for the development of feminist political theory. On the other hand, the same Western canon is in important ways constitutive of our political vocabulary, a valuable resource for political thinking that we can hardly do without. To recognize this reliance, however, is not to declare a truce. Feminism's relationship to the tradition has been and in all likelihood will remain, if not agonistic, deeply critical.

The stance feminists take toward canonical texts that exclude women as political subjects can be categorized, for the initial purpose of a schematic overview, into four critical projects: (1) to expose the absence of women from,

or their denigrated status in, canonical discussions of politics; (2) to integrate women into the very categories of political membership from which they had been originally excluded; (3) to show that women cannot be so integrated because their exclusion is constitutive of those very categories; (4) to draw the consequences of this impossible inclusion and reconstitute the categories of politics anew. According to this fourth project, the appropriate response to women's exclusion is an even more rigorous form of feminist critique that not only deconstructs inherited categories but generates new ways of thinking about politics. The task is one of critical reconstruction, that is, of transforming the core concepts of the political theory canon such that they speak to the significant changes in modern gender relations and the political demands of the feminist movement.

These critical approaches are by no means discrete and only in some very restricted sense chronologically based in the various waves of the feminist movement: elements of each can be found in the others and works written in an earlier historical period may well resonate with fresh insights in a later one. This chapter offers one narrative of developments in feminist political thought, but such narration should be viewed with caution. What comes later is by no means more sophisticated and there are many other ways in which the story of feminist theory could be told (Phillips 1998). How to tell the story is itself a matter of dispute among feminists about what matters for women in political life.

The best way to think about the different approaches described below is not as responses of solitary feminist theorists to a mostly androcentric tradition of canonical authors but as a conversation of feminist critics among themselves. Feminists respond to more than the canonical texts; they respond as well to the interpretations of those texts by other feminist critics. Like the canonical authors that Machiavelli famously called upon to stage an imaginary dialogue while in political exile, feminist critics, too, have created a conversation from a place of outsideness (Zerilli 1991). This feminist conversation seeks to disrupt the terms of the canonical one—premised as it is on women's absence—and to constitute a sense of political community based in part on the practice of forming judgments about the canonical texts.

Thus feminist engagements with the canon can be creatively understood as contributions to the constitution of critical community. Feminists may well disagree with the canonical authors, but they also disagree with each other. They discover the nature and limits of their sense of political community partly through the practice of interpretation and judgment. In this sense, then,

the canon of Western political theory remains a valuable resource for feminism despite its indifference and even hostility to women as political beings.

1 TRACKING WOMEN'S ABSENCE

Some of the first feminist critiques of the canon concerned themselves with exposing the absence of women from the core texts of the Western tradition. Feminists quickly discovered that what appeared to be the absence of women in many canonical texts was often accompanied by a deep worry about women's supposedly disorderly nature and its influence on men and the public sphere (Elshtain 1981; Okin 1979; Pitkin 1984). The work of excluding women entirely from discussions about politics was largely carried out by authors of the secondary literature (Jones and Jonasdottir 1988) rather than by the canonical writers themselves (Saxonhouse 1985). These writers did not so much ignore women as tried to justify the exclusion of women from public life. Such justification took the form of claiming that women were not fully rational, that they tended to be driven by their passions, especially their bodily desires, and above all their sexuality (Brennan and Pateman 1979; Figes 1970; Clark and Lange 1979; Mahowald 1978; Okin 1979). Although premodern and modern authors had quite different views of female sexuality (Laqueur 1992), they more or less figured it as an excess to be contained, in the interests of political and moral life, primarily through the restriction of the woman to the private realm of the household under the dominion of her father and/or husband. To be a woman was by definition to be excluded from participation in the political domain.

Focusing on the egregiously misogynist elements of the canonical texts, many of the aforementioned feminist critiques declared the canon totally bankrupt for thinking about women as political beings (Clarke and Lange 1979; Figes 1970). Not all feminist critics agreed, of course, but most held that the canon was clueless when it came to rethinking fundamental changes in modern political life, such as the claims made by various waves of the feminist movement to the rights of citizenship. Asking "What is man's potential?" but "what is a woman for?" the canonical authors never considered women as acting and judging members of the public realm (Okin 1979, 10). Especially

wanting was the possibility of any reply on the question of the public–private dichotomy, which feminists of the second wave famously challenged with the slogan: “the personal is political.” Canonical thinkers took for granted the naturalized concepts of gender and the sexual division of labor that feminists, in their claims to citizenship, questioned (Eisenstein 1981; Elshtain 1981; O’Brien 1981; Okin 1979; Pateman 1988; Phillips 1991; Pitkin 1984; Scott 1988). The issue, then, was not so much whether, say, Rousseau’s eighteenth-century argument for women’s domesticity was still valid; rather, it was whether an author like Rousseau still had anything to say on the issues that now mattered to feminists.

2 CORRECTING FOR WOMEN’S ABSENCE

To ask whether canonical thinkers have something to say to feminists today is a rather different project from the aforementioned attempt to track women’s absence in the canonical texts. Although feminists responding to the first critiques were still concerned to criticize the various justifications given for women’s exclusion, their engagement with the canon was driven by a broader critical impulse, namely the desire to question certain fundamental assumptions about what is, and what is not, political. Insofar as certain activities were deemed by canonical authors to be non-political, so, too, were those human beings who are primarily associated with them. If issues of sexuality, reproduction, and child-rearing are defined as private rather than public, feminists argued, what hope was there of integrating women into political life?

To question the exclusion of these activities from the domain of politics was, at the same time, to criticize their exclusive association with women as beings whose biological capacities defined their social function (Atkinson 1974; Landes 1988; MacKinnon 1987; O’Brien 1981; Shanley 1989). The idea that anatomy is destiny—which, with certain exceptions (e.g. John Stuart Mill), remained unquestioned by male canonical theorists—was at the center of the second-wave feminist critique. Private activities were redefined as political in the sense that they were no longer ascribed on the basis of membership in a naturalized sex class, but were subject to collective debate and change. The sex/gender distinction employed by many feminists of the

second-wave (Atkinson 1974; de Beauvoir 1952; Firestone 1970; Freeman 1975; Rubin 1975) was crucially important for questioning the biological basis of social activities and for loosening the sense of social necessity or destiny that attached, in the canonical texts, to sexed being.

Traditional assumptions about sexed being can be seen in the idea of a social contract. Famously articulated in the works of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, social contract theory excludes women as beings capable of contracting, that is, of making and keeping promises with political significance. Some thinkers have held that, although the citizen has been historically gendered masculine, it is in principle neutral and universal; thus we can expect, as with rights, the extension of social contract theory to women. The notion that women, too, can be included as signers of a social contract, however it is construed, fails to account for a constitutive if hidden feature: namely, men's property in women. According to Carole Pateman, the other story of the social contract is that of "the sexual contract," which secures the so-called natural basis of political society, namely, the patriarchal family. Once we recognize this, says Pateman (1988), we will understand why the contract is not a universal concept whose logic can be infinitely expanded to include previously excluded groups.

It is incumbent upon feminists to rethink core concepts of "malestream" political theory, then, not by adding women into the mix, but rather by altering the very framework of politics in which the concepts were first developed and the so-called woman question has been posed.

3 TRANSFORMING THE FRAMEWORK

Questioning attempts to integrate women into canonical understandings of citizenship, some feminists held that critique itself is not enough, for a genuine transformation of the Western intellectual inheritance requires a radical reconstruction of core political concepts. Critique was expanded to include the more positive project of rethinking what core concepts like authority, rights, equality, and freedom can mean once we recognize the claims of women as political beings and reject the private-public dichotomy that functions as the scaffolding of most canonical political thought. Such a

project is not without its risks. As Nancy Hirschmann and Christine Di Stefano write:

If an important feminist insight developed through our [feminists'] critique of "malestream" theory has been that women are excluded, and even that their exclusion is a foundation for these very theories, then bringing women back into these visions is at once reactionary—because it tries to fit women into an existing anti-woman framework—and radical—because the fact that women generally won't fit requires a serious alteration in the framework. (Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996, 5)

What it means to "bring women back in" here is significantly different from attempts to fold women into existing conceptions of the political. Altering the frame involves risking the loss of political orientation, for the meaning of inherited concepts can no longer be taken for granted, certainly not as something to which women could be added. The point is not to declare canonical theory bankrupt, as some feminists had, but to think of gender as a constitutive category of politics, a category that, were we to take account of it, has the potential to alter what we think politics is—especially democratic politics.

Trying to understand the complexity of modern power relations, especially those of sex and gender, some feminists turned to the work of Michel Foucault. In his view, power is not strictly a limitation or prohibition exerted on the political subject from above (which is how the canonical thinkers tended to construe it), but a productive force that constitutes the subject in relation to a wide-ranging matrix of quotidian disciplinary practices (Foucault 1980). Theorists working with Foucault's account of the constitution of modern subjectivity were among the most critical of previous attempts to resurrect canonical political concepts in accordance with the demands of feminism. According to Foucault, "juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent," observes Judith Butler (1990, 2). The very idea of the subject who freely contracts or claims her rights neglects the constitutive aspects of the political system, especially the formation of subjects as sexed and gendered (de Lauretis 1987). Any feminist appeal to such a system for the liberation of women is doomed to fail, it would seem, for the system itself is productive of, and dependent on, the feminine subject as subjected. "The question of the subject is crucial for politics, and for feminist politics in particular, because juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not show once the juridical structure of politics has been established," Butler (1990, 2) concludes.

This turn to the subject question in third-wave feminist theory marks a radical departure from attempts to include women in the category of the

subject as a sovereign and rational agent. Deeply critical of the assumptions about the nature of human subjectivity, feminists of the third-wave returned to the classic texts in order to expose the dangerous ideals of masculinity and the gendered character of the various fantasies of sovereignty and rationality found there (Brown 1988; Di Stefano 1991; Pateman 1988; Pitkin 1984; Wingrove 2000; Zerilli 1994). For some feminists, recognition of the problematic assumptions associated with the sovereign subject in political theory texts inspired attempts to reconstruct concepts of political subjectivity that would be less defensively gendered and more attuned to the interdependent nature of human existence (Benhabib 1992; Di Stefano 1991; Hirschmann 1992, 2002).

More generally, third-wave feminist accounts of subject formation raised questions about earlier works of feminist political theory, which had taken for granted the idea that women constitute, by virtue of their sexed identity, a political group. What in the 1990s came to be known as “identity politics” in feminism was premised on the assumption, held by most first- and second-wave feminists alike, that women *qua* women had shared interests based on shared experience (Cott 1987; Riley 1988). The idea that women *qua* women constitute a giant “sisterhood” waiting to be mobilized was, in the course of the decade, viewed with increasing skepticism. The very idea that women had shared interests assumed that gender identity was the nodal point in the constitution of political subjectivity. Critics pointed out that race, class, and sexuality (among other identity categories) had also to be considered in feminist accounts of political community (Grant 1993; Haraway 1991; Hartsock 1985; Collins 2000; hooks 1981, 2000; Phelan 2001; Rich 1980; Rubin 1984; Spelman 1988). Whereas these critics emphasized the idea of “intersectionality” in the construction of political identity, other feminists remained deeply skeptical about the very category of identity as the basis for feminist politics (Butler 1990; Brown 1995; Cornell 1995; Flax 1991; Honig 1992; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Riley 1988; Scott 1992; Zerilli 1994). In their view, the focus on identity tends to take for granted a pre-given feminine subject with a set of identity-based interests (rooted in the experience of being a woman), whose collective pursuit gets cast as the *raison d'être* of feminist politics itself.

The very idea of “women’s interests,” far from being given in the existence of women as a natural or social group, is the radical creation of feminist politics. Interests are not given in the fact of being a woman, in other words, but must be articulated politically: named and mediated in a public space. Accordingly, one cannot really speak of women as a unified group whose common interests serve as the foundation for feminist political community. Rather “women” as a

political collectivity comes into being through the activity of politics itself. The ability to say “we,” as Simone de Beauvoir had already recognized in *The Second Sex*, requires the transformation of women from a natural (sex) or social (gender) group into a political one. There is nothing necessary or automatic about this transition, many feminists argue, for it marks more of a rupture with socially ascribed forms of identity than their mere extension into another domain (Butler 1990, 1992; Brown 1995; Phillips 1995; Young 2000; Zerilli 1994).

In this way, many third-wave feminists questioned the core theoretical concept inherited from the second-wave, namely, the sex–gender distinction. They now viewed this once radical concept as exhibiting a blind spot: the idea of a naturally given female body. In their view, the famous sex–gender distinction threw something of a fig leaf over the female body, all the better to preserve it and the experiences associated with it (reproduction, motherhood, sexual violence, etc.) as the universal basis for a unified feminist politics (Butler 1990, 1992; Nicholson 1995). Putting sex into nature and gender into culture, the core concept of second-wave feminist critique retained the idea of shared experience based on anatomy while questioning socially ascribed gender roles based on those biological differences. What Linda Nicholson called the “coat-rack” theory of gender identity treated the female body as universal, a stable rack onto which the shifting accoutrements of diverse cultures are thrown (Nicholson 1995). Although second-wave feminists refuted the idea that the body must take a certain cultural meaning, few doubted that it could serve as the ground for commonality in the face of tremendous cultural diversity.

Without so much as the idea of the biologically given female body to anchor a sense of community across cultures and multiple points of social identification, some feminists protested, it seemed as if feminism had finally lost any sense of its collective subject; it had relinquished any possibility of speaking in the name of “women.” Was this not a disappearing act worthy of the very canonical thinkers that feminists had criticized?

4 FEMINISM WITHOUT WOMEN?

The critique of the feminine subject as the basis for feminist politics came, in the course of the 1990s, to generate a sense of political crisis. If feminism no

longer had a “subject” in whose name it could speak, critics argued, how could one speak of a movement called feminism? How can one make claims in no one’s name? And what distinguishes feminism from, say, political movements based on issues of class, race, or ecology? Why speak of feminism at all?

The sense of crisis that characterized feminist theory in the 1990s is in large part symptomatic of a fairly radical transformation in the very concept of politics itself. Part of what came under attack in the category of “women” debates was the idea that politics is the activity of pursuing interests on behalf of a subject (be it women, African-Americans, workers, or gays and lesbians). First- and second-wave feminists had challenged the idea that men could represent women’s interests and that there was, therefore, no need for their actual presence in elected bodies. This challenge, however, risked reinscribing traditional understandings of gender insofar as it took identity-based experience to be the real basis for political membership (Phillips 1995; Young 2000) and neglected, for the most part, the potentially transformative power of political participation on identity itself. Besides, feminists argued, it is by no means clear that women politicians represent the interests of women—assuming we can talk about such a thing—better than do their male counterparts. At a minimum one has to distinguish between the ability to represent the ideas and ideals of feminism (however these may be defined in different historical moments and by different constituencies) and the notion of women’s interests in some generalized sense (Dietz 2002; Riley 1988).

Central to the pursuit of identity-based interests, moreover, is an instrumental conception of politics. But if politics is merely a means to an end (e.g. a means to procure certain social goods), what sense was there to feminism understood as a deeply participatory political practice committed to hearing and exchanging different points of view? Hardly unique to feminism but deeply inflected by feminist concerns with the hidden power relations of the private realm, the idea of politics as a practice of empowerment came to figure as a radical departure from inherited conceptions of the political. In the complex societies of the Western industrial nations it has become increasingly difficult to sustain the focus on citizen empowerment, for citizens all too often lack, if not the expertise, the time required to grasp, and make decisions about, the issues that concern them. This is especially the case with women, whose increased participation in the paid workforce has not released them from the tasks associated with the sexual division of labor (Phillips 1991). Feminism has not escaped the temptation to hand over the difficult work of active citizenship to its own set of experts—but at a price. What some critics

see as the increasing entrenchment of feminism in the bureaucratic machinery of the liberal state raises questions about the ability of feminism to sustain its commitment to empowerment in the face of the empirical realities that seem to call for a more instrumental approach to matters of common concern (Ferguson 1984; McClure 1992; Zerilli 2005).

In the view of some critics, feminism has not been innocent when it comes to entanglement in what Kirstie McClure calls a “scientized politics” (McClure 1992b, 344). The idea that the task of feminist political theory is to establish the epistemological basis on which the social relations of sex and gender can be, first, criticized, then properly ordered, implicates feminism in conceptions of politics that tend to cede enormous power to various authorities or experts and to the state. The increasing reliance on the state to achieve feminist objectives, critics argue, tends to increase the impersonal power of bureaucracies and is at odds with the radical politics of empowerment that has been a central objective of the feminist movement in each of its waves (Brown 1995; Ferguson 1984). This reliance undercuts feminism’s power to transform the quotidian spaces of social and political life and to constitute alternative forms of community, trapping women instead in an endless quest for reparation whose addressee is the state and the courts (Brown 1995; Bower 1994; Milan 1990; Zerilli 2005).

Sympathetic to these concerns, Iris Marion Young argues that the voluntary associations of civil society have indeed been crucial to feminism as to democracy. “The self-organization of marginalized people into affinity grouping enables people to develop a language in which to voice experiences and perception that cannot be spoken in prevailing terms of political discourse,” writes Young (2000, 155). Voluntary associations carve out a space between the economy and the state in which citizens develop important political skills and practice self-governance. As vital as voluntary associations are to political movements like feminism, however, it would be mistaken to assume that they can substitute for the critical functions that the state has performed in regulating the capitalist economy and alleviating social inequality, in Young’s view. If a central goal of feminism is social justice, then the state remains a valuable site for feminist action. Young sees that a deep tension exists between “the authoritative power of state institutions . . . [and] the creativity of civic activity and the ideas expressed in the public spheres” (Young 2000, 190). Rather than try to eradicate this tension by refusing to engage with the state, she argues, we do better to remain vigilant about the ways in which reliance on state power can discipline citizens and deprive them of the very activities of empowerment that we associate with civil society.

Young's call to develop the associations of civil society and engage critically with state institutions is partly a reaction to the turn to questions of difference and subjectivity that characterized the category of "women" debates of the 1990s. Focused on the problems associated with identity differences and subject formation, many feminist theorists of the third-wave seem to have lost sight of the classic and legitimate political concerns of the canonical authors. The subject question has led feminism away from questions of collective action and citizenship, indeed from any robust understanding of the public sphere altogether. Social change seems restricted to work on the self or micro-practices of self-transformation.

In the view of other critics, the subject question has led feminism away from broader questions about structures of power and economic justice (Fraser 1997; Phillips 1999). The demand for recognition of marginalized identities, they argue, has displaced the questions about economic and social equality that have been central to feminism throughout its history. The critique does not call for a return to older models of social justice that sought the common good but rigorously excluded claims to difference; rather, it challenges us to rethink classic questions of redistribution from within the framework of a politics of difference and a multicultural world.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of difference came to be understood in terms not simply of gender but also of what goes under the sign of multiculturalism. The notion of differences among women, in other words, was inflected with concerns about deep cultural differences among groups, both within and between nation states. In the view of some feminists, especially those who endorsed political liberalism, the uncritical embracement of the idea of differences was often at the expense of women. Asking whether multiculturalism "is bad for women," Susan Okin (writing from within a neo-Rawlsian framework) answered with a resounding "yes." In her view, modern feminism's historical demand for equality ought to trump demands for cultural difference that oppose such equality. Her argument is explicitly directed against "the claim, made in the context of basically liberal democracies, that minority cultures or ways of life are not sufficiently protected by the practice of ensuring the individual rights of their members, and as a consequence [that] these should also be protected through special *group* rights or privileges." Insofar as "most [and especially non-Western, non-liberal] cultures are suffused with practices and ideologies concerning gender" which strongly disadvantage women, says Okin, "group rights are potentially, and in many cases actually, antifeminist" (Okin 1999, 10–11, 12).

Okin's essay raised difficult questions about the task and scope of feminist theory, for it articulated a claim to universal values such as rights that, historically speaking, have been associated with Western democracies. Like Okin, Martha Nussbaum argues that cultural traditions pose some of the greatest obstacles to women's self-development and well-being (Nussbaum 1999, 2000). Defending universalist values in feminism, she tries to give the concept of respect for and dignity of persons a non-metaphysical grounding in various cultures and practices. Critics are quick to point out, however, that Nussbaum's examples are resolutely Western and that the canonical thinkers to whom she turns (Aristotle, Kant, and Mill) foreground rationality as defining of human being. Notwithstanding these critiques, Nussbaum and Okin see something that we do well to consider: Feminists must make judgments about cultures and practices not always their own. The question, then, is, on what basis can such judgments be made?

5 FEMINIST THEORY IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

The question of how to make political judgments about other cultures and practices that deeply affect women is particularly important for feminist theory today. Globalization and the weakening of nation states have pressed feminists to raise political demands with an eye to their multicultural and transnational significance. The difficulties of theorizing in a global context could be said to center on the old question of universality. Feminists have critically interrogated the idea of universality for its androcentric bias (Gerhard 2001; Okin 1989; Young 1990). The problem of universality, however, is not restricted to the explicit or implicit assumption that Man stands for the universal and woman for the particular, as de Beauvoir showed long ago. The problem is also how to posit values and make political judgments without endorsing ethno- or sociocentrism. This problem is by no means new to feminists, but it takes on special urgency in our current geopolitical context. The very idea of the assimilation of cultural minorities to a certain national political culture, for example, is questionable when nation states themselves are increasingly diminished as sovereign political entities. Likewise, the

influence of multinational corporations and an increasingly unfettered capitalist economy on the lives of women across the world, as Nussbaum argues, have brought home the importance of developing a global feminist movement. What if any should be the principles guiding this movement? And how should feminists form political judgments based on these principles?

In the view of some critics, feminists need norms according to which they can orient themselves, build a collective movement, and make political judgments. As Seyla Benhabib sees it, the “infinitely skeptical and subversive attitude toward normative claims” that, in her view, characterizes the work of “postmodern” thinkers such as Butler, is “debilitating.” (Benhabib 1992, 15). In the absence of norms we would lack the ability to justify one course of action over another and thus have no way of acting politically. Likewise, Nussbaum argues for defining “central human functions [or capabilities], closely allied to political liberalism” as it has developed in the West (Nussbaum 2000, 5). And Okin—although (following Rawls) she does not promote a deeply substantive conception of the common good—advocates women’s capacity for autonomy and self-development as defining features of any feminism worthy of its name.

To posit a normative basis for feminism, however, does not come without a risk. The risk is not only sociocentrism but also critical quiescence about our own norms. These norms can come to function like rules according to which we judge other cultures and practices but never critically interrogate our own principles of judgment. We posit norms whenever we judge, of course, but the question is how to remain critical in relation to whatever norms we posit. In the work of Okin and Nussbaum, for example, Western cultures and practices are vastly superior to non-Western ones when it comes to the status of women. Although both thinkers see that forms of discrimination persist in the West, these pale when compared to non-Western forms. Recognizing the problem of sociocentrism at issue here, Benhabib claims that philosophy could provide the means for ordering and clarifying the norms of one’s own cultures such that they are subject to rational processes of validation. This assumes, however, that philosophy can generate so-called higher-order principles that would somehow transcend the prejudices of culture.

If it is true, as Wittgenstein holds, that our practices are at bottom ungrounded, part of a form of life that we normally do not question, then there can be no place outside those practices from which we could judge and no rational standpoint from which we could generate the higher-order principles that Benhabib advocates. The point here is not to endorse a complacent relativism about the treatment of women in societies and cultures

not our own, but rather to ask how we can develop the critical faculty of judgment. Second- and third-wave debates showed that inherited categories such as “women” can no longer serve in an unproblematic way as universals under which to subsume particulars. The same goes for the inherited categories of political theory, which feminists have shown to be, not bankrupt, but hardly suitable as a set of rules for making sense of modern gender relations and women’s political experience. The faculty of judgment, then, must involve more than the ability to apply rules.

The problem of judging without a concept is at the heart of the later work of Hannah Arendt, a political theorist once castigated by feminists for her lack of attention to questions of gender. In recent years, some feminists have returned to Arendt in an attempt to recover her action-centered account of politics and the common world (Bickford 1995; Honig 1995; Dietz 2002; Disch 1994; Zerilli 2005). Such a return is less a rapprochement than an attempt to move away from the questions of subjectivity and epistemology that concerned feminists throughout the 1990s and to recall instead what makes political theory a distinctive intellectual enterprise worth pursuing, not least for feminists. In her work on totalitarianism, Arendt struggled with the collapse of the Western tradition of political thought, that is, inherited categories of understanding and judgment. The question for her, as for feminists, is how to develop the critical faculty of judgment in the absence of these categories without succumbing either to dogmatism (the reaffirmation of unquestioned principles of judgment) or to skepticism (the claim that such principles are always subject to radical doubt and thus no judgment can be made). Moreover, Arendt thought that political community was constituted through the practice of making judgments. In her view, shared judgment, not identity, is the basis for political community.

Arendt’s call to develop the faculty of reflective judgment and her critical view of identity as the ground of community make her writings potentially useful for feminists who worry that gender as a category of analysis could reinforce, rather than undermine, the sexually dimorphic organization of social and political life. A danger implicit in many of the feminist critiques described in this chapter, in other words, is that they reconstitute (albeit unwittingly) the very categories of masculinity and femininity they question (Dietz 2002; Wingrove 2000). Arendt is one thinker whose conception of politics as action eschews identity categories such as gender, but there are many other political theorists to whom feminists might (re)turn as they raise questions about their own critical practice, including canonically

marginalized historical thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft (Gunther-Canada 2001). No longer content to ask “the woman question” in political theory, feminists might seek to ask the political theory question in feminism. They might seek, in other words, to constitute a different frame of reference for thinking politics, a frame characterized neither by the androcentric orientation of the canonical thinkers nor the gynocentric orientation of their feminist critics. Whether this attempt to think politics outside an exclusively gender-centered frame will succeed without reproducing the now familiar blind spots associated with the canon of political thought can only be judged by future generations of feminist critics.

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