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Two Feminisms

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In this paper I unpack a suspicion that much feminist thought about politics flows out of a misconception about the nature of the problems that women face, ultimately about the nature of politics and the public sphere. I suspect that the more conventional feminist approaches have a rather flat or narrow conception of politics: as primarily a one-way transmission of power, flowing from those who oppress to those oppressed. In this view, little if anything is done to conceptualize or problematize the media through which this supposed transmission passes; the media disappear from view and all that is left are actors with either sinister or innocent intentions. Just recall Catherine MacKinnon's claim that on day one men oppress women and then on day two they set up the stereotypes of femininity and so forth that would uphold and conceal this oppression. In this view, the public sphere is flatly reduced to a unidirectional flow of power. In contrast, in this paper I want to draw out another feminism that sees the ways in which actors or subjects are situated in a matrix of signs and symbols, of meaning-making (semiosis), of perspectival interpretation and perception. To do so I use the resources in various semiotic and pragmatist traditions, which have a much richer view of politics and the public sphere as discursive and semiotic processes and arenas. My initial suppositions coincide with those of John Dewey, that the public finds itself communicatively. From there I have turned to semiotics, developing my own synthesis of Peirce's view and Kristeva's, to see how the public sphere is a discursive space in which subjectivity, identity, and meaning are created, dispersed, and interpreted. In this second picture of the public world, feminist thought has a task different from the first one: instead of simply "fighting power," feminist practice calls for rethinking how meanings and identities are created in discursive and communicative processes and matrices. In this second view, political thought moves from an agonistic toward a more deliberative view of the political public sphere. In short, the model of fighting oppression gives way to thinking about discursively and deliberatively reconstituting the public sphere.

When feminists identify the problem as that of an oppression that can be peeled away, as the effect of an other that can be excommunicated, what we get

is a politics of exclusion. This might take the form of separatism, as championed by radical feminists such as Mary Daly. Or it might take the shape of agonistic politics—a politics of struggle—with adherents ranging from Chantal Mouffe to Bonnie Honig and, some argue, Hannah Arendt (though she can be read otherwise as well). By agonistic I mean the view that politics is a struggle over resources, a struggle over who gets what, where, and when, a competitive, aggregative process driven by self-interest. Feminist theorists and practitioners have long taken this view of politics, engaging in the *agon* in order to garner a more just and equitable distribution of power and resources for women.

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Many of the current generation of political theorists grew up in a world in which freedom or resources for one group came at the expense of the liberty and goods of another, and many of these theorists, feminists included, have been, on the whole—even as gains are being made—on the side still struggling. An agonistic lens shows the continuity between first-wave feminists who fought for equal rights and second-wave feminists who have been fighting for sexual and cultural freedom. Tying them together is the notion that patriarchy, the fathers in power, have found it in their own interests to deny women basic rights and resources. Feminist political struggle, in this view, is a battle to increase women's portion of the political pie. If one looks, one can see this common orientation across the spectrum of feminist approaches: liberal feminists seek more rights; cultural feminists seek greater validation of historically female practices and institutions; socialist feminists seek more access to economic power; and radical feminists want to attack the root of the problem, to undermine patriarchy's project of oppressing women.

All of these approaches, in one way or another, divide the world between female friend and male foe. Seeing the problem as one of oppression, they see men's and women's interests as antithetical and hence that any triumph for women will be at men's expense. Flowing out of this analysis, they share the notion that politics is agonal (that is, a matter of struggle) and that agonal politics is democratic when previously excluded or marginalized people, namely women, get entrée into the public arena.¹ This feminist politics sees political struggle as a means toward creating a more democratic society. One French "radical democrat," Chantal Mouffe, writes that, "far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is its very condition of existence" (Mouffe 2000, 103). She traces the word *politics* back to the word *polemos*, Greek for struggle and war.² (In my own etymological sleuthing, I have found no such connection.) She uses this etymology to support the common notion that politics is war by other means.

For Mouffe, and her early co-author Ernesto Laclau, political success, following Antonio Gramsci, is the creation of a new cultural hegemony, in which the values and aims of the previously marginalized groups come to dominate and appear transparently as what is right and good.³ Under this new hegemony, the needs of the majority of people will move to the fore, making the will of the majority the new public policy. In the sense that this new politics will meet the needs of the majority, this view considers itself to be democratic. The means themselves, though, are not democratic. The means might include propaganda, manipulation, ways of creating a new hegemony of those who have been excluded over those who have held power beforehand. In other words, Mouffe's radical democracy arguably has a more democratic end in mind—a public sphere that includes all those who have previously been denied the prerogatives of citizenship—but the politics itself is not necessarily democratic. Agonal feminist political theory is democratic only in the majoritarian sense, wanting to create a new hegemony of the previously silenced majority.

Because of my own peculiar biography and set of experiences, this approach never sits right with me. The closest I have been able to accept is that something we might call the *sociosymbolic system* oppresses us. Iris Young's analysis in her classic book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, moves a bit closer to this view, seeing oppression largely as an effect of social structures. From this point of view, men and women are all implicated altogether, for there is no *other* that foists the system upon us. We are all a part of it, simultaneously its victims and its perpetrators. And sometimes freedom from one oppression leads to a wholly new one (just as my ability to be a mother and a philosophy professor rests upon my economic privilege to pay others much less than I make per hour to care for my children).

Nonetheless, the notion of a sociosymbolic system can be even more powerful than Young's notion of structures. If we bring in Lacanian conceptions of the symbolic, we can see even more thorough and pervasive ways in which sociosymbolic systems "oppress" women. These systems are not something we can sanely reject, though, for they are the very same systems that allow us to differentiate and judge, think symbolically and speak with our fellows, write books and present at conferences. If this is an "oppression," it is a very assiduous one indeed. It cannot be peeled away like a dirty garment. Perhaps it can be reworked or reformed via means of replacing bad structures or dichotomies with more liberatory ones. As I'll discuss shortly, this may be a fruitful direction, but if we are to pursue it then we may find that the language of "oppression" is no help at all, for such language presumes flat flows of power and ignores the multidimensional trajectories of meaning and intervention that occur in a communicative public space.

Toward Another Politics

But before I turn there, let me take one more pass at how feminists define “the problem.” When the problem is seen as the product of an external oppressor, it is natural to look for a politics that seeks to banish, triumph over, or even annihilate the other. There are strands within feminist theory itself that call into question this approach and hence undercut the very notions that underlie agonistic politics. (These strands can be found in feminist critiques of liberal theory.⁴ And theorists such as Nancy Fraser, Jane Mansbridge, Carole Pateman, Iris Young, Seyla Benhabib, Anne Phillips, and many others have provided powerful critiques of the view of politics inaugurated by Joseph Schumpeter and played out through much of the twentieth century.⁵) They do so by taking issue with the view that self-interest is formed prepolitically. Both agonistic and liberal political theory seem to presuppose that one’s interests precede one’s entrance into politics and that politics is the arena in which one acts to maximize one’s own given set of interests. But for these other feminists I am now alluding to, as well as for pragmatists and others who have read Hegel seriously, there is no self prior to its formation in a sociohistorical world. Hence, it does not make sense to think of politics merely as an arena in which one barter (the liberal view) or struggles (the agonal view) to become better off than others. Self-interests or, to put it better, our conceptions of the good—of meaning, value, and purpose—are formed in the thick of politics, in and through our relations in a sociohistorical world. In short, subjectivity and its concomitant desires are formed socially and experientially in a world with others. There is no exclusion of the other without some dissolution of oneself. Hence, purely agonistic politics is a serious misadventure.

So how might the problem be conceived otherwise? Perhaps the fault lies not with oppression from without but from the way that sociosymbolic systems constitute us through and through. I think various theoretical frameworks try to get at these systems. Both psychoanalysis and semiotics consider how the self is constituted through language and relations with others. Certain approaches to linguistics, history, economics, and other social sciences consider how the social world, in time and through time, constitutes the self. American pragmatism and German critical theory dispute old concepts of fixed identity in favor of historical views of how the self performatively announces itself in a field with others. Heirs of Marx look at how the economy and its structures help shape our possibilities. Philosophers from Bergson to Royce consider the way that our understanding of time, extending backward through memory and forward through hope, connects us to a world of others, helping to create an identity in community. All these theoretical lenses open up aspects of our sociosymbolic world as a matrix through which we are constituted and positioned. We are not the holders of signs and symbols; they hold us. We can interact back, with the sort of

technics and probes Robert Innis discusses in his work; but these actions are always within a field that interacts back.

A promising feminist project follows along the lines that Charles S. Peirce inaugurated: an examination of the signs that make up our world and, with it, our selves. Instead of seeing politics as a flat field in which power flows from oppressor to oppressed, a semiotic approach sees a multidimensional world permeated by signs, with meaning and identity being produced through semiotic processes in which subjects (or at least those positioned as subjects) actively produce, interpret, and reinterpret meaning. The realm of signs, the semiotic public sphere or sociosymbolic order, is a dynamic repository of subjects' sublimations, their transformations of energy and desire into a publicly accessible sphere of language, art, and culture. We make, transform, and find ourselves in and through these cultural representations. Looking at the matters pragmatically and semiotically, we can see how the world is permeated by these "signs" of ourselves—or sometimes our selves are occluded by their exclusions from the public sphere—and that this world of signs demands interpretation. And we see that any active, novel interpretation, offered perhaps as a political act, produces new meanings and signs that in turn demand interpretation.

I think it is a step forward to move from a flat model of oppression to a multidimensional semiotic model; but then we see the magnitude of the task at hand. We live in a world in which signs and symbols, in multiple and overdetermined ways, constitute deep structures that continually keep women as second-class citizens, if citizens at all. These semiotic structures have positioned women as beings less able to engage in meaning making, semiosis, and civilization. But feminists attuned to these symbolic structures understand that the systems at hand cannot simply be tossed away and replaced. The task is to find ways to reconfigure the signs, along with their semiotic processes and structures, that produce negative conceptions of the feminine, conceptions that disappear from view, that become "natural" insofar as they operate at the level of metaphysical thinking, suppositions about what is "really real." The feminist task, then, is huge: to raise to consciousness the fundamental myths at work in the dichotomies of real/apparent, natural/cultural, active/passive, one/many. It is also to intervene in the way that these signs are deployed, to transform these structures that have heretofore served to exclude women from semiotic engagement.

Theorists who take signs at face value, as tools wielded by oppressors, fail to appreciate the ways that signs can be played with and turned on their head. Even with theory lagging, though, feminist and other activists have been able to intervene. Think of the way in which Madonna inverted the trappings of femininity, how the group the Guerrilla Girls unmasked the masculine bias of the art world, how the gay liberation movement used the derogatory term "queer" to gain power. These activists understood the power of signs, the kind of autonomy they have, and the ways in which they can be redeployed for political ends.

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There are a constellation of feminist theories that take up this challenge. Over the past two decades, some feminists have begun to approach politics in a way that can be recognized as pragmatic, democratic, and deliberative. As opposed to those who see politics as a contest, I think they understand that the fundamental task is to understand politics as a symbolic field in which, among many things, the meaning of what it is to be a woman is discursively or semiotically constituted. The forces at work are not exactly anonymous, but neither are they the forces of particular agents, e.g., oppressive men, misogynists, or patriarchs. Nefarious actors do not run the scene. Rather, we are all, men and women, born into a world in which symbolic structures always already constitute us as feminine or masculine with all the supposed affiliated attributes; that is, our subjectivity is constituted through these semiotic processes and structures. We learn to speak and to think in and through these structures, and then we in turn raise or inculcate other generations into and through these structures. This does not mean that we are passive victims of patriarchal structures, but it does mean that feminists are in the funny position of having to use the tools of a patriarchal structure or symbolic field in order to try to transform it. From a semiotic point of view, the hope of a political activist, feminist or otherwise, is to intervene in the way that signs are deployed. Such interventions do not come from outside of these semiotic processes, but in and through them; in other words, discursively and semiotically. We refashion language and symbols by *using* language and symbols, by discursively highlighting and questioning the ways in which semiotic processes function. There is no *outside* the system, no *we/they* dichotomy that the oppression model supposes. Instead of a politics of one party trying to overcome another, in this pragmatist approach we are all members of a common sociosymbolic field. Rather than pointing to *agon*, this model points to interventions into what we all share.

Of course, feminists understand that this common public sphere situates members differently, with women nearly universally positioned at the negative poles of binary thinking. In a symbolic field that sets at odds and hierarchizes concepts such as active and passive, mind and body, culture and nature, the feminine is positioned on the lower end. Situated at the negative poles of the symbolic field, women who intervene can come at these poles from the margins of the field. The French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray does this famously well, though I won't go into how she does that here. Suffice it to say that her interventions do use the language of the sociosymbolic field, but in a way that shows its weaknesses and blind spots. Hence, such interventions are critical without being oppositional. Likewise, other feminist theorists who focus on sociosymbolic fields part company with agonistic feminism. I am thinking of the works of some thinkers loosely known as continental feminists, though they

also have strong affinities with pragmatist thought, namely Julia Kristeva and some continental feminist theorists based in the United States such as Drucilla Cornell, Kelly Oliver, and the late Teresa Brennan.

It might be a stretch, but I think I can safely say that their ultimate interest is the commonweal and not the partisan interests of one segment of humanity. If my supposition is tenable, then their approach is open to what Sheldon Wolin describes as the political, “the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity” (1996, 31). While none of them directly addresses democratic theory, their views point toward democratic feminist politics in the same way that Peirce’s semiotics paved the way for Dewey to argue that the public “finds itself” *communicatively*. Attending to sociosymbolic structures and processes and the ways in which these formulate “the feminine” is the fundamental political task for feminists. Only after such work has begun can we fruitfully carry on other tasks, such as legal reforms, economic measures, and all. In a real sense, these other problems or symptoms are superstructural effects of fundamental maladies in the communicative public sphere.

What I have referred to throughout this paper with the poststructural, semiotic term the “sociosymbolic” field, is, ultimately, another way of talking about the central category in democratic thought today: the public sphere. Drawing on Habermas’s notion that this is a communicative arena in which lifeworld questions are addressed, that is, questions of solidarity, kinship, meaning, purpose, love, and justice, we can see from another angle the ways in which such matters of the commonweal—fundamentally political questions—are attended to discursively. These questions and meanings are constituted symbolically from and by the multitude of public actors, citizens, and subjects. The political public sphere is not a place but an ongoing semiotic happening, the grids and flows of communication: through the mass media, through dinner table conversation, web logs, cable access television, the local paper, the art world, PTA meetings, letters to the editor, the chattering on the playground and in the classroom. All of these are intersecting communicative fields in which meaning, identity, and purpose are created.

Feminists who understand “the problem” as the way in which this sociosymbolic field or discursive public sphere is structured tend to work directly on various ways in which this field structures subjectivity and experience. Many see subjectivity as a process, as do many process philosophers, not as a static entity. Radically departing from the Cartesian picture of the self as mind, as a glassy essence that is indivisible and fully transparent to itself, pragmatically inclined feminist thinkers understand that the self is continuously constituted via dynamic processes. They argue that any self emerges through a particular culture, language, history, time, and place. This does not mean that

subjectivity is constituted groundlessly, but that it is always a product of some particular sociohistorical symbolic framework.⁶

Another way that these pragmatically inclined, continental feminist theorists attend to the sociosymbolic field is through their conception of language. Along with much of the rest of philosophy in the twentieth century, continental thinkers took the linguistic turn. Continentally inspired feminists took this turn in especially productive ways. Kristeva, for example, develops the conception of *le sujet en procès* or the subject in process and on trial.⁷ She points to the ways in which we constitute ourselves through our signifying practice. In short, the signifying process includes not only our straightforward attempts to be meaningful but also the subterranean effects of our affects and drives. These drives and affects make their way into language, not directly but through a kind of channeling or sublimation, as Kelly Oliver has argued. To put it simply, our “animal” or libidinal energy and desire are transformed into “human” meaning, into the signs and symbols of a sociosymbolic sphere. Via a semiotic public sphere, we take part in human community, or what Aristotle called the polis, at least to the extent that we are able to take part in this quintessentially human, political activity. The public sphere is an effect of sublimation, a repository of past identity formations; those who have been othered are foreclosed from speaking, rendered speechless.

Attempts to render someone silent, through torture or other dehumanizing activities, deprive someone of membership in this sociosymbolic field. This is the evil of sexism, racism, and colonization. Changing and recovering from these systems require that those who have been silenced begin to speak. Kelly Oliver argues that survivors of political brutality reconstitute their own subjectivity by bearing witness, publicly, to the wrongs they endured.⁸ By bearing witness to these events, they performatively recreate their sense of being a self worth heeding.

In this paper I have sketched two feminisms. Perhaps too redundantly and unfairly, I have painted one as an agonistic view that sees the self standing outside of politics with politics being an arena one enters to battle for one’s own pre-given interests. The other I have found in the traditions that take Hegel seriously, that see the subject as always emerging *in* history. Feminists working within these post-Hegelian traditions—pragmatism and continental philosophy—can never take “the self” at face value, as some given subject with given attributes, as something prior to history that can be *restored* to purity, freedom, and autonomy once the vicissitudes of history have been corrected. This other feminism begins with an understanding that subjects come to be in time, in a sociosymbolic field, in a semiotic public sphere that structures our sentiments, identities, ideals. Theorists who take this semiosis, this public production of meaning, seriously focus their energy on this field itself, not on the hapless patriarchs, bigots, and misogynist policies these structures produce. Instead of

fighting power in a friend/foe schema, they attend to the semiotic workings of the public sphere itself. By differentiating between agonistic politics and the politics of the public sphere, I do not mean to exclude the ways in which contestation enters into politics. The making of the public sphere always involves difference, struggle, discord, and tension; but this agonistic dimension of politics is not the meaning of politics per se. In my many years of observing political processes, I see that central to politics, central to the motivation of anyone who cares to enter into the fray, is the hope that some kind of agreement might be reached. Without such hope, there would be no will to enter.

Notes

1. In this paragraph I briefly describe Chantal Mouffe's agonistic political theory. Others also adopt an agonal model, including Honig (1993) and Young (2000).

2. Presentation to the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, 1993[?].

3. See Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

4. See Mansbridge (1998), Jaggar (1983), and Frazer (2002).

5. This is familiar ground, so I won't rehearse all the ways that feminists have found fault with agonistic politics, primarily as it is manifested in liberal (as opposed to deliberative) democratic theory. Alison Jaggar, Jane Mansbridge, and Elizabeth Frazer do a very good job of summarizing this critique. See, for example, Fraser (1989), Pateman (1988), and Young (1990, 1997).

6. Additionally, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, including Jacques Lacan's reformulation of Freudian theory, such feminist theorists understand that, as living, desiring beings, we are who we are as a result of the shape of our desires and attachments, and these are forever shifting. We chase after things we think will satisfy us, but the real object of our desire (Lacan's *petit objet a*) is unattainable, so our search moves us from one object to another. As human beings grow and develop, their primary attachments change and transform, and so too do their own identities. Moreover, our identities are socially constituted, even in the minimal sociality of a mirror image. It is only by recognizing its image in a mirror, Lacan noted, that an infant develops an illusive yet delightful self-image as a unified being. The feminist legal theorist Drucilla Cornell uses Lacan to show how crucial it is for society to grant women reproductive rights, for these are ultimately about her bodily integrity and sense of self.

By seeing subjectivity and individuation as social and even political processes, these feminist thinkers provide a way of thinking about people's involvement in common activities. Echoing the views of many American feminists (such as Virginia Held in her criticism of Thomas Hobbes's atomism), they argue that people do not spring into the world fully formed. They are here by virtue of their caregivers, attachments, and relationships. Continental thinkers add that these attachments (or what psychoanalysts call *cathexes*) continue to shape subjectivity.

7. See Kristeva (1984).

8. See Oliver (2001).

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