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Response to Noëlle McAfee's, "Two Feminisms"

Commentary on Noëlle McAfee's "Two Feminisms"

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In "Two Feminisms" Noëlle McAfee rightly argues that the public sphere cannot be reduced to "a unidirectional flow of power," but instead is constituted as a "matrix of signs and symbols" in which citizen subjects are situated. I applaud McAfee's critique of the idea that politics is wholly defined by the pursuit of interests that exist in advance of the activity of politics itself. I would call this an instrumentalist or means-ends conception of politics, and there is no doubt that all three waves of feminists have been entangled in it.

The problem with this instrumentalist conception is that it does not attend properly to the constitutive character of the activity of politics itself, that is, the creation of tangible and

intangible networks of relations between political actors or what I elsewhere call "world-building" (Zerilli 2005). McAfee highlights this practice of world-building when she describes the creation of new meanings and new symbolic structures through which to reconstitute women's relationship to the public sphere itself. In this way, she emphasizes the transformative potential of politics, whereby the outcome of political struggle is not the mere inversion of the status quo (e.g., the displacement of one group [men] by another group [women]), but a kind of reconfiguration of the political field itself.

Where I find myself disagreeing with McAfee is on the very notion of "two feminisms." Although the instrumentalist conception of politics she describes surely exists within feminism, I would not associate it with the "agonistic model." According to McAfee's definition, agonistic feminists understand politics as a struggle for power. They do not seek to redefine what politics is but merely "to increase women's portion of the political pie" (141). Now there is no doubt that such feminists exist, and Catherine MacKinnon, named by McAfee as an example, might well count as one of them. The question is whether one can place MacKinnon in the agonistic camp, especially when that camp is also populated, as it is in McAfee's essay, by thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe and Bonnie Honig.

An agonistic approach to politics is not the same as an instrumentalist approach, though McAfee seems to think that they are more or less identical. There may well be "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 (147)," as McAfee describes it, but that is based on an understanding of agonism that simply does not resonate in the work of thinkers whom I would associate with the term. Take Mouffe's idea of hegemony. As it was developed together with Ernesto Laclau in *Hegemony and*

Socialist Strategy, hegemony contests rather than exemplifies the notion that politics is the struggle for pre-given interests. In their view, interests precisely are not always already given but must be “articulated”; only then do the horizontal “chains of equivalence” that characterize hegemonic political relations come into being (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Moreover, to set Mouffe at odds with feminists who emphasize the symbolic dimensions of politics seems especially strange considering that semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis were two enormously important sources for the notion of politics advanced in her post-Marxist mode of political theorizing.

My point here is not to quarrel about interpretations of texts so much as it is to contest the idea that a political approach that emphasizes the principle of struggle, by definition, never really challenges the rules of the game. The agonistic model, as I understand it, has as its antagonist neither the semiotic model that might be derived from Pierce, nor the psychoanalytic model that has been derived from Lacan, but, rather, the deliberative model as it has been developed in the work of Jürgen Habermas and appropriated by feminists such as Seyla Benhabib. Agonistic political theory, as I understand that umbrella term, emphasizes not the pursuit of interests – and surely not pre-given interests in the way that either liberalism does or classical Marxism did – but the irreducible fact of struggle that is not subject to rational adjudication. By contrast with deliberative democrats, agonistic political thinkers do not believe that the public realm is or ought to be characterized as the space of “rational” deliberation aimed at reaching consensus whose end is justice. Nor do they agree that the problem of democracy is defined in terms of equal-participation rights. Here they share with Hannah Arendt the idea that politics is a sphere of action and a kind of continual practice of the preservation and reinvention of public freedom understood as collective self-organization and political participation in the broadest sense. It is not the rule of law, as such, but the quotidian exercise of constitutionally

guaranteed rights and the ongoing struggle for their extension (rather than their mere possession) that distinguish a democracy from other regimes, in the agonistic view.

In this sense, then, I would ask McAfee to reconsider whether the problem really is that one group of feminists (the agonistic camp) sees politics as a contest between pre-given interests and “nefarious actors”, whereas the other group (the “pragmatic, democratic and deliberative” camp, p. 145) sees “politics as a symbolic field where the meaning of what it is to be a woman is discursively or semiotically constituted” (145). For one thing, the semiotic construction of gender is not, as far as I know, a central concern of deliberative democrats. For another, it is not immediately clear to me how the pragmatist tradition, which certainly gives space to the role of rhetoric in public discourse, can be squared with the deliberative democracy model, which emphasizes the principle of rationality in the adjudication of competing validity claims. My point is that the pragmatic model that might be derived from Pierce and the deliberative model that has been derived from Habermas are by no means alike on this point, among others, and, furthermore, that they do not stand together as the source of one form of feminism (deliberative) against another form (agonistic). In fact, when it comes to an understanding of public discourse as fundamentally rhetorical, there are probably more similarities between the agonistic model, as it has been developed by Mouffe and Laclau, and the American pragmatist tradition that has its roots in Pierce, than there are between Pierce and Habermas.

Finally, though I agree that questions of symbolic meaning can be important for feminist politics, it is not clear to me that a politics centered on questions of feminine subjectivity and its constitution is necessarily different from the mean-ends conception of politics that McAfee wrongly (in my view) calls agonistic. The question of subjectivity needs to be articulated politically, but in the past feminism has tended to see politics

as the means through which to change (or destroy) femininity. The activity of politics, understood as participation in public affairs, certainly can alter psychic structures of gender. But is the “subject” the proper question of feminist politics? For McAfee, it appears that it is. “Attending to sociosymbolic structures and processes and the ways in which these formulate ‘the feminine’ is the fundamental political task for feminists” (146), she writes. “Only after such work has begun can we fruitfully carry on other tasks, such as legal reforms, economic measures, and all” (146). Here, I am not really sure what is meant. If the idea is that one would have to change the structure of subjectivity prior to changing other social structures, then I would beg to differ. Legal or economic reform might well entail an alteration in the sociosymbolic structures of gender that McAfee sees as the real work of feminist politics. In any case, it is hard to conceptualize what work on these structures, and ultimately subjectivity, could be in the absence of practices that include such reform. To paraphrase Rousseau, one needs to take men and women as they are, not as one wishes them to be. That is the starting point of feminist politics.

In conclusion, I would thank McAfee for calling our attention to those dimensions of politics that are not captured by the conventional notion of politics as a struggle of pre-given interests. But I would ask that she reconsider what may be, in her own words, a “too redundantly and unfairly” sketched account of “two feminisms” and elaborate instead a more differentiated view, one that more adequately represents the differences I described above. I believe that this more differentiated account would allow McAfee to see the affinities between her own view and that of agonistic democrats such as Mouffe. It might also provoke reconsideration, in light of McAfee’s understanding of feminism, of whether deliberative democrats make the best bedfellows.

References

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