

# Public Woman

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*.  
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.

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**T**he feminist movement suffers a double crisis. Internally, it tends toward fragmentation into sects (socialist-feminists, lesbians, black women, radicals, Latinas) and toward too simplistic identification of its enemy (as men, sexism, capitalism). Moreover, it has sometimes proved insensitive to other forms of oppression (of minorities, of working-class men) and susceptible to reduction to single-issue politics, thus permitting itself to be easily co-opted. Externally, it endures the attack of the Moral Majority and Reagan administration in addition to the apathy of political moderates preoccupied with the economy.

As feminists widely contend, the movement needs a coherent theoretical vision to reflect, contextualize, and guide its practice. The lack of such an understanding exacerbates its internal problems and abets its external ones. Women have frequently rejected the classic political texts of western culture as mere patriarchal exercises, useless to the tasks of creating a new epistemology, language, and vision appropriate for women. Although the tradition of political thought is concerned with issues of freedom, justice, and equality that are central to feminism, the tradition's history of ignoring women as political beings makes its relevance to the movement very problematic. In particular, pre-Marxist male theorists seem to many feminists irrelevant except as stark, exemplary embodiments of misogyny.<sup>1</sup> To say the least,

the leading articulators of feminist perspectives in our time have *not* seen as one of their major tasks making contact with . . . that "ancient and continuous discourse that began in the fifth century B.C. with the public life of the Athenian *polis* and the political discourse which centered around it and often against it."

<sup>1</sup> Susan Moller Okin in *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) argues in part that the exclusion of women from equal place with men is integral, even necessary, to political theories. In other words, the tradition of political thought is built to a "great extent" on the premise of sexism.

Jean Bethke Elshtain initiates that contact between feminism and the polis's legacy in *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*. Unlike the "leading articulators of feminist perspectives," she is not primarily a debunker of Western political theory. Her chief concerns are not to unmask the misogyny, strip bare the sexism, or expose the oppressive "patriarchy" hidden within the line of thinkers from Plato to Marx. On the contrary, she argues that feminists must re-pose the ancient questions long ignored. They must inquire into the Aristotelian issues: which ideals and obligations are required to animate a just society? What are the beliefs and habits integral to political order? How can we be educated to the "capacity for self-reflection" on the ends and means of public and private action?

According to Elshtain, these questions address the heart of feminism's needs. She has long urged that the crucial, as yet unaccomplished, task for feminism involves creating "a vision of political community and of citizenship that might serve as the touchstone of a collective identity for males and females alike."<sup>2</sup> She has been willing to take unpopular stands against major spokeswomen in the movement in order to press her case that feminism will destroy itself unless it raises civic issues and ceases to make simplistic assumptions about enemies and institutions.

In fact, her book's first part, "Public and Private Images in Western Political Thought," is considerably kinder to male theorists such as Augustine and Rousseau than the second part, "Contemporary Images of Public and Private: Toward a Critical Theory of Women and Politics," is to the feminists it examines. In the latter part, she calls to account the leading feminist perspectives—"radical, liberal, Marxist, and psychoanalytic." Such thinkers as Mary Daly, Betty Friedan, Juliet Mitchell, and Dorothy Dinnerstein are all shown to avoid the rigorous thinking which would force them to confront the civic implications of their claims. Their "thin" conceptions of citizenship result in foreshortened, unimaginative accounts of the relation between public and private that do injustice to both modes of experience. Each faction either collapses public and private, over-politicizes personal life, or ignores politics altogether. In addition, Elshtain observes that feminists "junk all notions of what is essential, of limiting conditions, in the creation of the future by concentrating exclusively on what must, *they believe*, change in order for women to be 'free.' They will brook no disagreement for to disagree is to exhibit the poison of 'male identification.'"

<sup>2</sup> Elshtain, "Feminists Against the Family," the *Nation*, November 17, 1979, p. 500. In a critique of white (especially academic) feminists, Bell Hooks argues the need to "reappropriate the term 'feminism,' to focus on the fact that to be 'feminist' in any authentic sense . . . is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression." *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), p. 195.

Thus, having identified an impoverished view on the part of major feminists regarding the relation of public and private experience and an equally impoverished capacity to tolerate oppositional perspectives on the matter, Elshtain proposes a twofold strategy: she suggests that we “embrace a politics of limits” and that we discover the ethical imperative lodged in “maternal thinking.”<sup>3</sup>

Even in the midst of oppression and corruption, feminists must avoid the temptations of mere defensiveness and *ressentiment* and recognize the necessity of authority, public law, and civic virtue: “A vision or fantasy of a better world, an ethical polity, need not involve the utter destruction of the old, nor become stuck in unchecked interiority.” Some notion of limitation and control should be built into the revision of the common world, Elshtain argues, or we will all succumb to the “allure of hate”—whether for men, for other factions of feminism, or simply for what now exists around us. She fears the ultimate costs of rejecting as “male” the traditions and history that have also helped shape women’s lives. All institutions, values, and practices cannot come under radical scrutiny without raising the specter of deepening our cultural disintegration and delegitimation.

If notions of public law, authority, and civic obligations provide necessary limits to imagining alternative societies, the everyday experiences of women provide the positive clues for the content of a transformed world: “I am here calling for *the redemption of the everyday life* . . . to affirm the protection of fragile and vulnerable human existence.” Following Sara Ruddick, Elshtain offers the phrase “maternal thinking” to name the ethical commitments embedded in women’s customary activities. She believes that “values and language flow from ‘mothering’ [which could] signal a force of great reconstructive potential.” This nurturing ethic could be politicized, extending its implications to all women and men: “The activation of a female participatory capability must begin with her immediate concerns, go on to give a robust account of them, and then bring these concerns to a transformed vision of the political community.” Such visions “may finally manifest themselves in and through action on the public level,” according to Elshtain, but she warns us early in the book that her task is not to tell us how this can or should happen. In juxtaposing the views of the classic texts on private and public with the perspectives of contemporary feminists, she hopes to increase the sophistication of feminist debate and to provide appropriate standards for judging theories of private and public life.

<sup>3</sup> See also Elshtain’s further comments on “maternal thinking” in “Antigone’s Daughters,” *democracy* 2, no. 2 (April 1982).

Elshtain's inattentiveness to feminism as a movement and parallel inattentiveness to the historical settings of Western political theorists result in methodological and political limitations. In the end, we learn too little from the male thinkers on whom she concentrates. We do need to know about the incoherencies in past theories of private and public, but we need also to learn the methods by which prior theorists responded to crises and found ways of raising crucial issues for their chosen audiences. Thus, thinkers such as Aristotle and Machiavelli have more to teach contemporary feminists than just their notions of the relation of women and politics; their conceptualization of the nature of theorizing amid the cultural crises of Athens and Florence is equally instructive.

Because of Elshtain's decontextualization of the feminists in Part II, we miss the rich resources within the activities of the movement. There are, for example, a multitude of feminist associations in which women assist one another to take control of their health needs, to establish self-respecting and self-reliant environments after having been battered, to develop cooperative work structures, and so forth. Within these associations, women have already discovered they can speak about and interpret their own experiences, and can develop strategies to alter some of the sources of their problems. Moreover, the process of associating carries its own sophisticated teachings and radical potential. As Margaret Cerullo has pointed out, the feminist movement has had a significant impact on the organizational planning of American socialists:

[We cannot] retain [the] conception of political strategy—which sees revolution as an event and one that is oriented to the seizure or transformation of state power. Central to a feminist understanding of politics by contrast is a distinction between the structure of power and the structure of the state. [T]his implies . . . that revolution is also a matter of changing the structures of power that are internalized and reproduced in our daily lives. This means a longer struggle in which people's deepest commitments to this society are eroded through the process of collectively experiencing something different.<sup>4</sup>

Responsiveness to the subversive potential in the process of associating and thus experiencing "something different" from mainstream culture does not mean that traditions of thought and other aspects of our heritage need all be jettisoned. In fact, greater attention to current feminist practice could strengthen the links Elshtain wants us to make with western thought. The tradition of political theory can be revitalized rather than destroyed by contact with a living movement and social context.

<sup>4</sup> "Autonomy and the Limits of Organization: A Socialist-Feminist Response to Harry Boyte," *Socialist Review* 9, no. 1 (January-February 1979): 97.

Parts I and II of *Public Man, Private Woman* would have greater coherence if we first accept and then extend Elshtain's challenge to make contact between feminism and the discourse of political theory. There are important women thinkers who, while not "feminist," prompt us nonetheless on how to make that contact. They offer guidance on how to escape the liabilities in the specific content of an older theory, how to use that theory's own method to internally criticize it, and how to use the older paradigm without ignoring the specific features of the new historical setting. Mary Wollstonecraft and Rosa Luxemburg, for instance, bear careful study for their respective transformations of Lockean and Marxist paradigms into theories that acknowledged the social and political participation of new groups, that demystified arbitrary and centralized authority, and that identified subtle alternatives to violence. Not only do they exemplify what it means to be a woman and care about collective life but they also implicitly teach the methods for making their theories relevant to feminism by demonstrating how they made earlier political thought relevant to their own times of crisis. In addition, Hannah Arendt's transformation of Aristotelian political theory and reflections on Zionism—Elshtain's severe criticism of her notwithstanding—have much to teach feminist theorists about the links between the history of political thought and the practices of a movement.

Among Wollstonecraft, Arendt, and Luxemburg, the last most explicitly set out the interconnections of social context, political movements, and critical thinking. She realized that German society, the Social Democrats, and her fellow Spartacists were all at different points of self-consciousness about the need for and means of political change. In her view, the members of the movement had to initiate rather than be led into actions within the larger society. Such confrontations would result in the exposure of serious contradictions within the society. Theorists had to listen carefully to the membership of the movement, learning from their errors as well as their successes how social conditions were being altered and new possibilities were emerging. The answers could arise only as the problems appeared in practice; they could not be dreamed ahead of their time. The principal purpose of the theorist-educator in this view is to make articulate what the movement seems to desire and to direct that statement back into the movement for the widest possible discussion.

Luxemburg argued that a theory built of abstract principles was as dangerous and "opportunistic" as an anarchic activism contemptuous of theory. The task of the theorist was creative rather than destructive; to provide the overview which draws out the inherent direction and purpose of separate activities and persuasions within the movement. While Elshtain assists us to see the opportunistic dangers, as it were, in certain anti-intellectual, unreflective statements by some feminists, we also need to note that a vital feminist theory remains in touch with the practice of feminism.

In confronting external forces, associations of women have the potential to create subversive, genuinely democratic strategies. It is incumbent on feminist theorists to reflect upon such experiences and draw out their implications. Currently, for example, there are attempts by women's health collectives to introduce safer methods of birth control, like the cervical cap, into their communities. Their efforts bring them into confrontation with the combined force of bureaucratized government agencies, large drug companies that manufacture variations of the pill, and a widespread belief in the infallibility of gynecological professionals. In the process of securing safer birth control devices, a local Santa Cruz collective became acutely aware of the ties among federal regulations, corporate power, and the larger history of technology and women's health. Such recognition engendered a sharing of information not only on better health techniques but also on the political implications of the variety of controls exercised over women's private lives. It is scarcely surprising that involvement with such issues radicalizes women by making them aware of their ability to help themselves in concert with others and by making them conscious of the scope of the opposition to that self-help.

While we should be wary of romanticizing small self-help groups as an automatic panacea, Luxemburg, Arendt, and other women theorists draw our attention to the political fact that democratic power can only emerge from democratic practice in face-to-face associations. The "ethical polity" called for by Elshtain first must be constituted in the social relations of a movement that undertakes the reordering of society. The activities of women's health collectives, feminist antinuclear groups, rape prevention centers, etc., need contact with a tradition of critical inquiry that will reveal their weaknesses but at the same time preserve their self-perceived strengths, especially that of community-building.

Perhaps one reason why Elshtain deflects attention from such feminist associations involves her passionate concern to save the family. She fears that feminists are further eroding the already faltering structure of the family. Rightly, she regards the family as one of the few remaining institutions which can intervene between the individual and the state. But "maternal thinking," the nurturance of children, and the practices of parenting may not provide "moral and political imperatives" and furthermore may not signal a "force of great reconstructive potential," since, unfortunately, the "protection of fragile and vulnerable human existence" by nurturing people is perfectly compatible with nonparticipatory, nondemocratic politics.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Andre Gorz makes the parallel point about the environmentalist movement in *Ecology as Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1980). He argues that it is "impossible to derive an ethic from ecology." The sustenance of life and "stewardship of nature" are necessary but insufficient premises for the movement. When they are taken as ultimate goals, any number of means to sustain "mere life" becomes justifiable or easily rationalizable. He further argues that only freedom, or the quality of collective life, can serve as an ultimate guide.

Families, as Elshtain suggests, may indeed be our first teachers in the "loaded and contested terms of discourse, public and private." An equally important education, however, derives from the experience of a movement and collective action. If parents introduce us to political terms, peers are the ones who can make them meaningful. Parents and children seldom confront together the force of the corporate world and the bureaucratic state or the "received cultural" ideology in ways that generate principled action. Feminist associations, therefore, deserve as much "nurturing" attention from theorists as families do. Unlike the family, face-to-face feminist groups offer the theorist valuable lessons in the possibilities of contemporary democratic possibilities.

Elshtain has argued strenuously that in order for western political theory to assist feminism it must be sensitized to the experience of the family in ensuring the survival of the individual. She further believes that the civic questions posed by the tradition can assist feminists in resolving their internal and external crises. In juxtaposing the political classics with feminists, she initiates a promising study. If both the movement and the tradition have more to offer one another in dialogue than Elshtain demonstrates, then the impulse behind *Public Man, Private Woman* is fully justified and we are challenged to extend even more rigorously her imperative to rethink the possibilities for an ethical polity.

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