Gender in Political Theory
For R. J. H.
Gender in Political Theory

Judith Squires

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Contents

Introduction  Gendering Political Theory  1

Introduction  1
The Discipline of Politics  7
Gender and Political Studies  10
Feminist Theory  12
   Anti-theoreticism  12
   Inter-disciplinarity  14
Feminist Theories and the Discipline of Politics  16
Conclusion  19

PART I  FRACTIOUS FEMINIST FRAMES  21

1 Framing Politics  23

   Introduction  23
   Public and Private  24
   Power  32
      Conflictual conceptions of power  32
      Capacity conceptions of power  35
      Practice conceptions of power  35
   Feminist Theories of Power  39
      Feminist articulations of power as capacity  40
      Synthesizing conflict and capacity  42
      Democratic forms of power  44
      Summary  45
Reconstructing the Political
  Institutional
  Ethical
  Critical
Conclusion

2 Framing Gender

Introduction
Sex and Gender
  Constructionism
  Structuralist forms of constructionism
  From single to multiple social structures
  From material to discursive constructionism
Summary
Beyond Sex and Gender
  Corporeality
Essentialism and Autonomy
  Essentialism
  Autonomy
Mobile Subjectivities
The Politics of Subjectivity
Masculinities
Conclusion

3 Framing Theory

Introduction
Objectivity
Interpretation
Genealogy
Three Frames of Political Theory
  Objectivism and political theory
  Empiricism and rationalism
  The interpretivist challenge to empiricism
  The rationalist defence of political theory
  The genealogical challenge
Three Frames of Gender Theory
  Objectivist gender theory
  Interpretative gender theory
  Genealogical gender theory
Relating Objectivity, Interpretation and Genealogy
Conclusion
Contents

PART II RECONSTRUCTING THE POLITICAL 113

4 Equality 115

Introduction 115
Equality and Difference 116
Equality 117
Difference 117
Between equality and difference 118
Beyond Dichotomy 122
Diversity 124
Difference and dichotomy 126
Equality and sameness 127
Relating Equality, Difference and Diversity 132
Difference/identity 133
Diversity/difference 135
Equality revisited 137
Conclusion 139

5 Justice 140

Introduction 140
An Ethic of Justice 141
An Ethic of Care 143
Gendered Ethics? 144
Between Caring and Justice 148
Justice and Care as Political Principles 152
Extending the ethic of justice 154
Extending the ethic of care 156
Synthesizing justice and care 157
Justice, Caring and Difference 160
Conclusion 163

6 Citizenship 166

Introduction 166
Complex Citizenships 166
Rights and responsibilities 168
University and particularity 170
Cosmopolitanism and territoriality 171
Feminist Perspectives on Citizenship 173
Maternalist citizenship 175
Feminist civic republican citizenship theory 178
Contents

Rejecting Both Maternalism and Universalism 179
   Liberal citizenship reconsidered 184
   Beyond binaries 186
Territoriality Reconsidered 188
Conclusion 192

7 Representation 194

Introduction 194
Participatory and Representative Conceptions of the Political 195
The Conception of Representation 201
The Representation of Women 204
   Interests, identities and group representation 206
   Modified defences of group representation 208
   Representation and contingent identities 214
Ideological and Geographic Representation Reconsidered 217
   Representation, recognition and redistribution 217
   Re-siting the political 223
Conclusion 223

Conclusion 226

References and Bibliography 233

Index 251
Introduction

Gendering Political Theory

Introduction

Gender theory, in all its complex forms, has worked to unsettle established conventions about the nature and boundaries of the political. Until the emergence of feminist theory as a recognized academic perspective, contemporary political theory was largely assumed to be gender-neutral in focus. This assumption has now been subject to extensive critique. To look at gendered perspectives in political theory is not to engender that which was gender-neutral: it is to reveal the highly gendered nature of mainstream political theorizing. This entails outlining alternative gendered perspectives that are silenced by mistaking a particular perspective for impartiality. It is to create space for more heterogeneous gendered perspectives within political theory.

There is an oddly paradoxical relation between politics and gender. On the one hand issues of gender are clearly central to any understanding of the political. Both the practice and the study of politics have long been notoriously masculine endeavours. So much so that many commentators have argued that politics has historically been the most explicitly masculine human activity of all. It has been more exclusively limited to men and more self-consciously masculine than any other social practice (Brown 1988: 4). The institutional manifestations of politics located in government have been notoriously resistant to the incorporation of women, their interests or perspectives. Women have by and large been excluded from traditional political activity and discouraged from defining their activities as political. In this sense issues of gender have long been constitutive of the definition and operation of
Introduction

politics. On the other hand issues of gender are largely assumed to be irrelevant to the political. If gender is understood, as it frequently has been, as synonymous with women, then women’s absence from the political sphere can be taken to imply that gender issues are simply not relevant to politics.

In the light of this apparent paradox, explorations of gender in political theory have to date been undertaken primarily by those pursuing a feminist agenda. For it is feminists who have been most sensitive to the fallacy involved in conflating men with individuals and masculinity with neutrality. So, while it is feminist political theory that has explicitly theorized gender in recent times, it is entirely possible to consider gender in political theory from perspectives other than feminist. There is, for instance, a growing body of literature exploring men and masculinity, which might usefully inform considerations of gender in political theory, and which is distinct (in its intellectual and political focus) from the extensive feminist literature that has developed. Nonetheless, given the overwhelmingly masculine nature of politics up to the present time, it has been feminists who have had the strongest political motivation and intellectual ambition to explore gender in political theory. And it is for this reason that I draw on feminist political theory in the following reflections on gender in political theory. It should become clear by the end of the book, though, that future explorations of gender in political theory are far less likely to be so dependent on an exclusively feminist literature. The feminist debates considered in this book have opened up the space for rethinking gender in more multiple ways, allowing us to move beyond the male–female dichotomy as it has operated within political (and also much feminist) theory to date.

It still makes sense to approach the issue of gender in political theory via feminist theory, not least because the literature that engages with this topic is either focused on, or has emerged from, ‘the woman question’. Nonetheless, I accept that to focus exclusively on the woman question is to make men and masculinity the unnamed norm and to silence gender (in its fullest sense) as an analytic category (Ferguson 1993: 2). My aim is to show how feminist theorizing has transformed the terms of debate within political theory such that it becomes possible to theorize not only female subjectivity but also female and male subjectivities (in pluralized forms), and ultimately corporeal subjectivities more generally. The implicit presumption that the discipline was concerned with ‘the man question’ was challenged by the demand that it overtly consider ‘the woman question’. This demand is itself now challenged by the proposal that the more important task is to consider the complexities of gender questions beyond the confines of the dichotomous construction of masculinity and femininity.
Introduction

Not only is the relation between politics and gender paradoxical, and the relation between gender and feminism shifting; intriguingly the relation between feminism and politics is also paradoxical. Feminists routinely claim that politics has consistently excluded women. They also claim that feminism is explicitly political. Feminism, as Anne Phillips tells us, ‘is politics’ (Phillips 1998: 1). Its project, to realize fundamental transformations in gender relations, is overtly political in the sense that it seeks to shift existing power relations in favour of women. The apparent tension between the claim that ‘feminism is politics’ and that politics has been exclusively limited to men lies in the different notions of politics employed here. Women have largely been excluded from the political, where politics is defined as the institutional forum of government. But, when defined primarily as a process of negotiation or struggle over the distribution of power, it becomes evident that, far from being excluded from politics, women have both shaped and been shaped by its operation. In other words, the apparently paradoxical nature of these two statements subjects the political itself to scrutiny. It also raises questions about the nature of feminist objectives in relation to the political: is the ambition to include women in a political from which they are currently excluded, or to reconfigure a political by which they are currently oppressed? Or is it to displace the apparent opposition between these two options? The centrality of these three strategies will become apparent in the course of this book.

I shall be using a typology of ‘inclusion’, ‘reversal’ and ‘displacement’ to map out three importantly distinct approaches to gender in political theory. Those pursuing a strategy of inclusion aim to include women in a political from which they are currently excluded. They usually aspire to impartiality, conceive of people as autonomous and espouse an equality politics. They are often labelled liberal feminists. Those pursuing a strategy of reversal aim to reconfigure the political as currently conceived such that it becomes more open to their gendered specificity. They usually adopt an interpretative methodology, talk of ‘Woman’ or ‘women’ and espouse a difference politics. They are often labelled radical, maternal or cultural feminists. Those pursuing a strategy of displacement aim to destabilize the apparent opposition between the strategies of inclusion and reversal. They usually adopt a genealogical methodology, speak of subject positions and of gendering (as a verb) rather than gender (as a noun) and espouse a diversity politics. They are often labelled postmodern or post-structuralist feminists. The strategy of inclusion seeks gender-neutrality; the strategy of reversal seeks recognition for a specifically female gendered identity; and the strategy of displacement seeks to deconstruct those discursive regimes that engender the subject.
Kathy Ferguson neatly summarizes the distinction between the three archetypal strategies. In the first, she argues, women’s exclusion is problematized, in the second, men are problematized, and in the third ‘the gendered world itself becomes a problem’ (Ferguson 1993: 3). Christine Di Stefano offers a similar tripartite distinction (which she labels rationalist, anti-rationalist and post-rationalist respectively). In the first frame ‘she dissolves into he as gender differences are collapsed into the (masculine) figure of the Everyman.’ In the second, ‘she is preserved at the expense of her transformation and liberation from the conventions of femininity.’ In the third, ‘she dissolves into a perplexing plurality of difference, none of which can be theoretically or politically privileged over others’ (Di Stefano 1990: 77).

This last strategy of displacement has had profound implications for the nature of debate within gender theory. Before its impact it was common to find feminist theory characterized by a clear opposition between those who would endorse and extend dominant values to all irrespective of gender, and those who would challenge and reverse dominant values from a specifically female perspective. The advocate of displacement, by contrast, argues that, whether gender justice was thought to entail the extension or reversal of dominant norms, it actually manifests a tendency to echo that which it sought to oppose. Both operate, in different ways, within a dichotomous framework generated by established power networks. The truly radical project is here understood to entail recasting rather than sustaining or rejecting masculinist binary thought (Brown 1995: 20).

The normative task for the theorist aiming at inclusion is to argue that gender ought to be non-pertinent to politics. The normative task for the theorist aiming at reversal is to argue that politics ought to be reconstructed to manifest the distinctive perspective of non-hegemonic gender identities (usually female). The normative task for the theorist aiming at displacement is to reveal the extent to which gendered identities are themselves products of particular political discourses (although – it should be noted – there is some uncertainty as to whether this is actually a normative project at all). Understanding the nature of, and interplay between, these three strategies is vital to understanding current debates about gender in political theory. Between them, they map the current preoccupations of gender theorists.

These strategies of inclusion, reversal and displacement are, though, only archetypes. They are rarely manifest in their pure form in practice. They should not be taken to delimit the range of political perspectives possible. To get too bogged down in a dispute between them is to confuse archetypal purity for actual complexity. It is, if you like, to confuse characters with characteristics. As each character embraces a multitude
Introduction

of complex (and often conflicting) characteristics, so too individual theorists and activists inevitably oscillate between and within the three political perspectives delineated. There will always be some who adopt one perspective unambiguously. But it does not lessen the significance or pertinence of the archetypes to recognize that one can (and most do) adopt a more fluid relation to them than this.

It is also worth noting that, although my intention is to convey the diversity of opinion within current writing on gender in political theory without oversimplifying the literature, by imposing a typology on what is actually a very complex field I shall inevitably be creating my own frame of analysis. The creation of frames from which one can view the literature is a political act in itself, and one that the reader might usefully reflect upon. Though these three strategies have come of late to be seen as central to gender theory, they do, notwithstanding their complexity and diversity, occlude many of the concerns central to socialist and Marxist feminists. Significant exclusions, which are themselves revealing, arise from constructing the focus of gender theory in this way. Notably, the inclusion, reversal, displacement schema focuses attention on, as it is largely shaped by, questions of subjectivity.

A real achievement of the gender in political theory literature has been to focus attention squarely on the ontological presumptions underpinning existing political debates. Those theories that did not explicitly address the ontological relied on an implicit and unexamined view of these issues. If dominant debates in political theory rarely explicitly addressed questions of gender identity, it was because these were presumed rather than absent. Feminist political theory has challenged this presumption in a three-stage project. It has first of all uncovered and made explicit the ontological assumptions implicit in existing advocacy debates about justice. It has then engaged directly in ontological questions and critically evaluated implicit ontological assumptions. Finally, it has returned to and reconceptualized the advocacy debates in the context of this new ontological ‘background’.

The obvious focus of much of the early feminist political theory was directed towards the first of these tasks: engaging in detailed and thorough critique of the ontological presumptions within mainstream texts and making explicit the gendered nature of the canon of political theory. More recent feminist political theory, the focus of this book, has moved on to address the second and third tasks: the direct reconceptualization of the ontological background framing future advocacy debates; and the subsequent ‘revisioning of the political’ itself (see Yeatman 1994b and Hirschmann and Di Stefano 1996). The second of these tasks has generated extensive and, at times, heated debates. These are outlined in Part I.
Introduction

The third task, that of revisioning the political in the light of the new ontological background, is still underway and will be considered in Part II. The chapters in this section focus on the issues of equality, justice, citizenship and representation respectively—central categories of mainstream political theory and therefore equally central sites of the revisioning of the political from gendered perspectives. These attempts to elaborate a reconceived conception of politics are clearly a part of the third phase of feminist theory. They have been and will continue to be hugely invigorating and beneficial for political theory.

Although the fractious frames delineated in Part I correlate to the political strategies of inclusion, reversal and displacement surveyed in relation to specific political issues in Part II, they are not synonymous. I have distinguished between ontological debates in Part I and advocacy debates in Part II in order to focus attention on the different order of debate at play in each, and to encourage reflection on the appropriate relation between the two. As Charles Taylor has argued, ontological and advocacy issues are distinct ‘in the sense that taking a position on one does not force your hand on the other. On the other hand, they are not completely independent, in that the stand one takes on the ontological level can be part of the essential background of the view one advocates’ (Taylor 1991: 160). It is, Taylor argues, the inadequate appreciation of the distinctness and the connection that confuses debate. The distinction between these two orders of debate is signalled in this book by the division between Parts I and II. Part I outlines the ontological and methodological background disputes that frame more particular advocacy debates. The stance adopted in relation to the ontological and methodological debates of Part I provides the ‘essential background’ to the distinctive strategies of inclusion, reversal and displacement that are evident in Part II, but does not itself do all the work. The project of reconceptualizing the political will also require a direct engagement with issues of advocacy.

The chapters in Part II address specific debates within political theory. The debates considered are those which address the core political concepts of equality, justice, citizenship and representation. Each debate is structured around the three strategies outlined above. The first perspective in each of the chapters in Part II represents the position from which gender is to be transcended to allow political theory to be neutral. The task of the theorist concerned with gender and political theory is to rid political theory of an inappropriate intrusion of gendered identities where they ought properly to be non-pertinent. The second perspective is characterized by the belief that gender identities are to be asserted as the basis for a reconceptualized, but inherently gendered, political theory. The task of the theorist concerned with gender and political theory here
is to reverse political theory's masculine presumptions and articulate a
distinctively feminine or feminist political theory. The third perspective
holds the concept of gender to be partly constituted by the discourses of
political theory itself. The task of the theorist concerned with gender
and political theory here is neither to de-gender nor to re-gender politi-
cal theory, but to reveal the ways in which political theory genders.

In order to grasp in more detail what the project of 'gender in politi-
cal theory' entails, let us consider the nature of the discipline of politics,
comprising both political science and political theory and the ways in
which the issue of gender gets configured, or excluded, by these formul-
ations of the political. We can then turn our attention to the nature of
feminist theorizing outside the confines of politics, focusing on the am-
bivalent relation between feminism and theory and the inter-disciplinary
nature of feminist theorizing. Drawing these reflections together, we
can look at the way in which feminist theory relates to political theory.
It should then be possible to consider how and why the project of gender
in political studies is conceived of in distinct ways.

The Discipline of Politics

The origins of the discipline of politics are commonly located with
Aristotle's The Politics, in which he evaluates differing constitutions in
search of the best method of government. Since this time there has been
deep-rooted disagreement as to what constitutes the political. There is
even disagreement about the status of statements about the nature of
the political. With regard to definitions of the political, there are those
who define politics in terms of governmental institutions and others
who define it in terms of relations of power. Some focus on a narrowly
defined range of power relations; others adopt a very broad range. With
regard to the status of such definitions themselves, there are those who
argue that there is an empirically verifiable truth as to what constitutes
the political (Easton 1968). There are others who maintain that any
definition will be no more than a contingent social construction, the
discipline of politics being dependent upon the nature of the political
arena, itself dependent upon socially constructed and historically vari-
able forces. Definitions of the political are not therefore discoverable in
nature but are rather a legacy or convention (Wolin 1961: 5).

It is this second contextualist approach that is more dominant in
contemporary debates. While the positivist perspective (endorsing object-
vivity) was strongly articulated throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the
more common approach during the 1970s and 1980s was social con-
structionist in relation to status (Leftwich 1984a: 4). During the 1990s,
with the rise of deconstructionist methodologies, a third perspective also emerged in relation to this debate. Definitions of the political, it is now frequently argued, are neither empirically true nor simply reflections of underlying social relations, but rather active means to shape the 'real' world. Political theory does not reflect already given social relations, as Kate Nash argues, 'it is part of attempts to institute them' (Nash 1998: 50). This insight has increased the intensity of the debate concerning the substance of these definitions.

In recent times debates within political studies about the nature of the political have tended to be polarized between advocates of politics as institutions of government and as relations of power. In the former the political is equated with the juridical – issues of rights, justice and responsibility. In the latter the political is equated with the instrumental – issues of power, policy and pragmatism. Within this debate politics gets bifurcated, as William Connolly tells us, between principle and instrumentality, 'with one group of individualists (rights theorists, theorists of justice) celebrating the former and another group (utilitarians, pragmatists) insisting upon the incorrigibility of the latter' (Connolly 1991: 74). On the institutional conception of the political politics is defined as government institutions. On the instrumental conception of the political politics is defined as power and decision-making. These two different conceptions of politics generate two different sets of criteria for differentiating political life from all other aspects of society and 'thereby for isolating the subject matter of Political Science' (Easton 1968: 283).

The institutional perspective has been a dominant one within the academic study of politics in contemporary liberal states. Many people have argued that the instrumentalist perspective emerges in response to the perceived inadequacies of the principled or institutional perspective (Easton 1968, Connolly 1991). During the 1970s the instrumental conception of politics was even deemed the true definition, finally releasing political science 'from its synthetic past', thereby enabling theoretical consensus (Easton 1968: 87). Now, however, it is more common to find academics arguing that both perspectives are the partial and flawed product of an underlying, though itself socially constructed, commitment to individualism. Connolly, for example, asserts that neither faction 'comes to terms vigorously with the constructed character of both the virtuous self and the self-interested self or with the extent to which both constructions were valued by their early theoretical designers because of their calculability, predictability, and utility to sovereign power' (Connolly 1991: 74). In other words, the institutional and the instrumental conceptions of the political adopt very different understandings of people (pursuing moral reason or self-interest) but share a common
focus on individuals rather than groups, structures or systems. Given this, more structuralist (and post-structuralist) critics argue, to focus only on the debate between the institutional and the instrumental definitions of politics is to work within the narrow confines of individualism.

Accordingly it is now common to find academics proposing a broader definition of politics as the study of power. This is usually an extension of the early instrumentalist definition of the political, differing in its refusal to delimit political power and political decisions from all other types of power and decisions. Whereas instrumentalist theorists of politics claimed to have objective criteria for delimiting the boundary of the political, contemporary theorists of politics commonly exhibit scepticism not only about the particular boundaries proposed, but also about the possibility of producing any objective criteria of delineation at all. As Leftwich and Held comment: ‘There is, in fact, nothing more political than the constant attempts to exclude certain types of issues from politics’ (Leftwich and Held 1984: 144). Far from being neutral clarifications of empirical fact, these delimitations are ‘strategies of depoliticization’ whereby issues are kept off the political agenda. The achievement of such a delimitation, and erection of particular boundaries around the political, is itself a manifestation of power.

If one accepts this challenge, one is then required to consider whether there can be any convincing boundary to the political at all. Focusing attention on politics as power, in all its manifestations, reduces the significance of the precise boundaries of the institutional form of politics (Leftwich 1984a: 10). Indeed it runs the risk of generating a definition of politics that is so wide as to lose its specificity and usefulness. Politics, Leftwich and Held tell us, ‘is a phenomenon found in and between all groups, institutions (formal and informal) and societies, cutting across public and private life. It is involved in all the relations, institutions and structures which are implicated in the activities of production and reproduction in the life of societies. It is expressed in all the activities of co-operation, negotiation and struggle over the use, production and distribution of resources which this entails’ (Leftwich and Held 1984: 144).

Although this broad conception of the political has its weaknesses, it is nonetheless the one that – more than any other – has created the disciplinary space for considering issues of gender as central to the study of politics. It is the adoption of the narrow institutional or instrumental conception of the political within most dominant renderings of the discipline that accounts for the fact that the study of politics has been one of the last to take up the challenge of feminist scholarship, and more recently men’s studies, and modify the canon. The more extensive power-based conception of the political both emerges from, and makes possible, the feminist challenge to the orthodoxy of politics.
Introduction

Gender and Political Studies

There is, Pateman has influentially proposed, something about the discipline of politics and the orthodox understanding of the subject matter of political inquiry that makes it particularly resistant to feminist argument. She claims that the power of men over women 'is excluded from scrutiny and deemed irrelevant to political life and democracy by the patriarchal construction of the categories with which political theorists work’ (Pateman 1989: 13–14). Joni Lovenduski makes a similar claim. The dominant conception of political studies is bound to exclude women, she tells us, ‘largely because women usually do not dispose of public power, belong to political elites or hold influential positions in government institutions’ (Lovenduski 1981: 88).

What is intriguing here is that Lovenduski and Pateman make the same claim in regard to the ‘orthodox’ study of politics, even though they have significantly distinct conceptions of which orthodoxy they have in mind. The discipline of politics has been bifurcated into political science and political theory, which have tended to operate with instrumental and institutional conceptions of the political respectively. The former largely fails to theorize power; the latter adopts narrow, one- and two-dimensional conceptions of power. Each has been overtly and inherently exclusionary regarding issues of gender. They represent distinct – but equally inhospitable – traditions.

Pateman criticizes the primarily institutional focus of liberal political theory, while Lovenduski criticizes the primarily instrumentalist focus of positivist political science. Both the instrumental and the institutional conceptions of politics focus attention on a public sphere of decision-making. Both exclude from the proper remit of political study the social relations that characterize the private sphere. As a result, Pateman argues, ‘both women’s exclusion from the public world and the manner of our inclusion have escaped the notice of political theorists’ (Pateman 1989: 4).

With regard to political science, Lovenduski argues that, if gender is considered from the instrumentalist conception of the political, it is as a background variable, rarely surfacing as significant. Work has been done by female political scientists within this framework to identify bias in the standard literature on political participation and voting behaviour and to collect new research material (see Bourque and Grossholtz 1998). But many feel that a more substantial understanding of women’s political behaviour would require a critical questioning of the definition of what is political itself.

Lovenduski locates the primary source of women’s apparent exclusion from the study of politics with post-war positivism and its construction
of American political science. Virginia Sapiro argues that the legacy of positivism has been more ambivalent than this in relation to feminist research. While it has inhibited research (as Lovenduski points out), it has also promoted the study of women in that the rigorous conventions of objectivity adopted by positivist political science enabled women to subject the statements made by political scientists to empirical tests (Sapiro 1998: 72). In other words, women were able to break into the field by holding the discipline accountable to its own professed ideals of objectivity.

Yet the political theory half of the discipline of politics has been perhaps more resistant to the question of gender. Indeed, Susan Moller Okin, herself a prominent political theorist, argues that, ‘compared with some other academic disciplines, contemporary political theory is in one significant respect in the Dark Ages . . . most political theorists have yet to take gender – by which I mean the social institutionalization of sexual difference – seriously’ (Okin 1991: 39). One of the first and most influential theorists to attempt to challenge this state of affairs was Pateman. The object of her critique is not 1950s positivism but seventeenth-century social contract theory.

Pateman claims that sexual difference and the subordination of women are central to the construction of modern political theory. This means that contemporary political theorists, whatever their personal commitments, are able to admit the relevance or significance of feminist questions and criticisms only with great difficulty. This is not because of individual bias, but because ‘such matters are systematically excluded from their theorizing by the modern patriarchal construction of the object of their studies, “political” theory itself’ (Pateman 1989: 3). The central mechanism by which this exclusion is realized is the assumption that the political is public and that the private realm of the domestic, of familial and sexual relations, lies outside the proper concern of the study of the political (see Chapter 1).

Pateman’s distinctive contribution has been to reveal the significant role played by the seventeenth-century social contract theorists in the creation of this exclusion. Such is the continued influence of these theorists that contemporary theorists now work within their parameters without subjecting them to explicit scrutiny. This means that the political implications of a social order divided between public and private arenas have come to be precluded from critical investigation. If definitions of the political are themselves political acts entailing the exercise of power, the power of this particular discourse is so great as to have achieved hegemonic status. We need, Pateman tells us, to understand what is excluded in the classic social contract definition of the political, and why. The original social contract is conventionally depicted as a
contract between equals which ensured people's political freedom. What has been systematically forgotten is that it also entailed a sexual contract, which ensured women's social subordination (Pateman 1988: 77-115).

One of the many implications of Pateman's analysis is that the continued omission of questions of gender from politics syllabuses has been a result not simply of contingent and individual acts of sexism, but rather of a fundamental partiality of the very terms of debate upon which the discipline has been based. Both Lovenduski and Pateman take what they perceive to be the dominant disciplinary paradigm to task for failing to be adequately inclusive with regard to gender. Because the study of politics has become so bifurcated between science and theory, they do so on very different terms. What they share, however, is a firm belief that the very construction of the discipline of politics needs to be recast if it is to consider the political experiences of women and allow a meaningful consideration of gender.

Feminist Theory

The attempts to develop a political theory sensitive to the insights of feminism have clearly been significantly hindered by the essentially patriarchal assumptions underpinning the very discipline itself. But there have been other barriers too, one arising from within feminism itself. The belief that the bases of theoretical reflection need to be reconceptualized if gender is to be adequately considered stood, for a significant period, in direct conflict with a widespread feminist rejection of the very project of theoretical abstraction. Once feminists did embrace theoretical inquiry, however, the areas of study ranged from subjectivity to aesthetics, but rarely concentrated on the institutions of government.

Anti-theoreticism

If there is a paradoxical relation between politics and feminism, there is also an ambiguous relation between feminism and theory. Within early second-wave articulations of feminism there was a pronounced hostility to theory. Misgivings about the pursuit of gender theory came not only from within the male academic establishment (worried about gender as an appropriate theoretical concern), but also from within the women's movement itself (worried about theory as an appropriate form of engagement). The feminist suspicion of theory was, at least at the beginnings of second-wave feminism, pronounced.
A significant number of feminists argued, and some continue to argue – though increasingly against the tide of both feminist and academic opinion – that the establishment of feminist theory as an academic discourse, and of women’s studies as an academic discipline, entailed the exploitation and de-radicalization of feminism. The fear was, and is, that the energies that should be directed towards the transformation of social and sexual relationships would inevitably be dissipated in ‘narrow scholastic battles which serve only to perpetuate those hierarchies of control and authority to which the women’s movement is opposed’ (Evans 1997: 17). This suspicion was based on two distinct concerns: elitism and abstraction.

The concern about the elitist, anti-democratic nature of theory can be met with the argument that theory is likely to become elitist for reasons outside itself. To assume that work which is difficult is elitist is to confuse the form with the context. The concern about abstraction, however, pertains to form itself. It has often been asserted (both by certain feminists and by their mainstream critics) that there is something distinctly masculine about the very endeavour of theory, and something particularly feminine about the reliance upon feeling and personal experience. As Mary Evans notes, this frequently served to legitimate subjective and personal reactions to subordination rather than the coherent analysis of that subordination (Evans 1997: 18).

Both essentialist and strategic arguments were deployed to justify this subjectivism. The essentialist argument asserts an essential female nature, which generates an embedded, particular and emotional form of understanding (to be discussed in Chapter 3). The strategic argument responds to the perceived role of existing theories in the perpetuation of patriarchal power relations with the inversion of the allegedly objective view of theory and the celebration of subjectivism. In the words of a much-read manifesto of early second-wave feminism: ‘We regard our personal experiences and our feelings about that experience as the basis for an analysis of our common situation. We cannot rely on existing ideologies as they are all products of male supremacist culture. We question every generalization and accept none that are not confirmed by our experience’ (Firestone and Koedt 1969: 55). This perception that all theory could be equated with patriarchal ideology led to an anti-theoreticism and radical subjectivism among many women active in the women’s movement (Grant 1993).

It is interesting to reflect that this early hostility to theory has done little to dampen the enthusiasm with which numerous other feminists took up the challenge of developing new, distinctive feminist theories. The ‘risks of anti-theoreticism’ and the dangers of remaining at, what Evans refers to as, ‘that stage of primitive subjectivism that is characteristic of
some of the most reactionary social organizations in existence’ (Evans 1997: 20) proved too compelling to ignore. Theory became something to embrace and transform. In response to the question ‘why theory?’ Jane Flax argues that:

the most important characteristic of theory is that it is a systematic, analytical approach to everyday experience. This everybody does unconsciously. To theorise, then, is to bring this unconscious process to a conscious level so it can be developed and refined. All of us operate on theories, though most of them are implicit. We screen out certain things; we allow others to affect us; we make choices and we don’t always understand why. Theory, in other words, makes those choices conscious, and enables us to use them more efficiently. (Flax 1993: 80–1)

In short, the political commitment to social change which motivated early feminist anti-theoreticism has now come to underpin the creation and application of ever-increasingly sophisticated theories. Since the early 1980s the production of feminist and gender theories has been nothing short of staggering. The initial suspicion of abstraction nonetheless remains. Many feminists emphasize the importance of experience, context and narrativity and view the desire to abstract as underpinned by discourses of power (Christian 1997: 69–78).

Inter-disciplinarity

It is important to note that the development of feminist theory has been largely inter-disciplinary. It has emerged across disciplinary boundaries, drawing together ideas, methodologies and concerns that had conventionally been located within discrete disciplinary canons.

Feminist scholarship – as Barrett notes – ‘has always had the ambition to transcend disciplinary boundaries’ (Barrett 1992a: 211). And this has usually entailed the importing of methods and techniques from elsewhere. The analysis of gender has generated a highly eclectic approach to existing theories, with feminist theorists taking the theoretical tools of one discipline to engage with issues in another. Theorists engaging in the project of reconstructing political theory in the light of feminism have frequently drawn upon theoretical literature developed within psychology, literary theory, film theory, sociology and philosophy.

The introduction of the concerns and approaches more common to the humanities into the study of politics has not only eroded the boundaries but has also challenged the foundations of much that went before. The debates, which have generated such productive contributions to the reconceptualization of the political from various gendered perspectives,
have largely drawn upon a feminist theory literature that is avowedly and self-consciously inter-disciplinary. Suspicion of dominant constructions of disciplinary boundaries among many feminist theorists has propelled most to work in an inter-disciplinary fashion, drawing upon and developing theoretical debates that seem to offer useful insights wherever they emerge.

However, this inter-disciplinarity has not taken the form of an equal flow of theoretical approaches across disciplinary boundaries. The movement has tended to be from the humanities to the social sciences and sciences, not the other way around (Sapiro 1998a: 74–6). One notable trend within recent years has been the importation of literary and aesthetic theories into social and political theory. As Barrett rightly points out, we have seen, in the last ten years, ‘an extensive “turn to culture” in feminism. Academically, the social sciences have lost their purchase within feminism and the rising star lies with the arts, humanities and philosophy’ (Barrett 1992a: 204). The attention of humanities feminists to social-science feminists, Sapiro notes, ‘is not equivalent to the attention social-science feminists pay to the humanities’ (Sapiro 1998a: 75).

Sapiro discerns four distinct reasons for this lack of two-way interdisciplinarity: the ‘science’ question in feminism; the discovery of politics; the political climate; and the rise of post-structuralism (Sapiro 1998a: 76). Each of these makes humanities-based feminist theorists less likely to borrow theoretical insights from the discipline of politics than vice versa. Firstly, there is a tendency within feminist studies to be suspicious of research that invokes scientific norms (to be discussed in Chapter 3). Secondly, the impact of the feminist claim that ‘the personal is political’, and the rise of cultural politics generally, led many to focus on politics in disparate locations and consider their own discipline as political (to be discussed in Chapter 1). Thirdly, a negative reaction to the overly narrow institutional and instrumental conceptions of politics led many to vacate the traditional arena of government altogether in their research (also to be discussed in Chapter 1). Fourthly, the rise of post-structuralism renders problematic the contemplation, central to political studies, of responsibility, voice and intention (Sapiro 1998a: 76–82).

While not all feminist political scientists and political theorists would accept all of these four claims, Sapiro rightly highlights the uneasy relation between feminist theory and political studies, and the need to reclaim a distinctive disciplinary identity for feminist political studies. This is an important point in the context of the ‘turn to culture’ which has left many feminist political scientists and theorists rather unsure as to the centrality of their own project. The impact of this turn to culture on the study of gender in politics has been complex. Some simply view it as ‘somewhat perplexing’ (Phillips 1998: 2). Others consider it a negative
refusal to engage in the important issue of government. Others again view it as a positive move, which might generate a more adequate understanding of subjective political motivation and contemporary cultural politics. There may be some truth in each of these positions. There has certainly been a turn away from theorizing material structures of oppression and institutional mechanisms of governance towards theorizing identity and knowledge, or subjectivity and epistemology (as considered in chapters 2 and 3 respectively). Whether these new theoretical insights can be brought to bear on the more traditional concerns of political studies and tied into considerations of government is the central issue facing contemporary theorists of gender in political studies.

When considered in isolation from instrumental and institutional conceptions of politics, this feminist literature can appear apolitical and certainly does little to reconstruct more orthodox discourses. As one commentator claims: ‘Feminist theory and empirical gender politics research have surely not been deliberately estranged, but it seems that they have had unfortunately narrow epistemological grounds, and almost no methodological grounds, in common’ (Rinehart 1992: 16). This is certainly the case if one contrasts a narrow instrumentalist view of political science with much of the recent feminist cultural theory. But happily there also exists a significant body of work that attempts to bridge these two and develop a coherent discipline that addresses gender in political science and political theory. As one political theorist notes: ‘feminism – at least in its academic guise – needs a calling back to politics’ (Dietz 1991: 250).

Feminist Theories and the Discipline of Politics

There is a broad consensus among feminist commentators as to the chronological development of strategies for integrating feminist theory into the discipline of politics. Kathleen Jones offers an account of the impact of feminist theory upon the discipline, which follows distinct chronological stages (Jones 1993a: 26–30). The engagement starts with a critical exploration and articulation of what classical theorists have said (for example, Okin 1979, Eisenstein 1981). It then entails the extension of the boundaries of political theory by broadening the range of questions asked (for example, Okin 1979, Okin 1989, Sapiro 1983). It ultimately involves the production of genealogies of the central concepts of political discourse (for example, Brown 1988, Hartsock 1983, Elstain 1981, Elstain 1982a, O'Brien 1983).

Pateman adopts a similar schema. She argues that the development of feminist political theory follows a path that starts with feminist
interpretations of the classic texts, moves on to extend the range of questions asked (‘does the foetus have rights?’, ‘is there a form of injustice that happens to affect women in particular?’), and culminates in a distinctive feminist theory (Pateman 1989: 2).

This threefold schema of ‘adding women in’, ‘extending the boundaries’, and ‘reconceptualizing the core concepts’ is used in relation to political science as well as to political theory. Lovenduski argues that feminism has made a threefold contribution to political science. The first entails ‘identifying and publicising sexist bias in the standard literature on political participation, political socialisation and voting behaviour’; the second involves the collection of new research material; and the third contribution is the production of works of critical theory which challenge the manner in which political studies has constructed its object of study (Lovenduski 1981: 93). Indeed this schema is not unique to the discipline of politics, but is thought to hold in relation also to other disciplines (see Walby 1997: 137).

As the relation between feminism and political studies evolves, so also the objectives of the feminist political theorists develop. Significantly, there is a shift from an integrationist project – which aims to add women into the existing framework – to a transformative project – which aims to reveal the extent to which current conceptions of gender structure the nature of politics itself. The former focuses on the ways in which politics has structured gender relations, the latter on the ways in which gender structures politics itself. The understanding of gender is distinct in these two positions. As Jones tells us, in the first ‘gender’ is merely a descriptive category; in the second it is also a code of meaning through which actual experiences are constructed (Jones 1993a: 29–30). In other words, the integrationist project focuses on women’s exclusion from the public world, while the transformative project concentrates on the manner of their inclusion (Pateman 1989: 4).

There is a general consensus within much current feminist political theory that the integrationist project of ‘adding women in’ was a necessary first step that inevitably led to the adoption of the more profound transformative project of reconceptualizing the very terrain and terms of political discourse. Sapiro offers a characterization of this development that is widely held: ‘In the early days defining th[e] field as women and politics seemed unproblematic because we were primarily interested in how women fitted into politics and what their impact was. Some of us now prefer gender politics, explicitly reconceptualizing the field as exploring the relationships between gender and politics more broadly defined’ (Sapiro 1998a: 68).

Transformers argue that the integrationist project is essentially self-defeating in that women’s exclusion from the political is not contingent