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Reply to Allen, Bauer, Pratt and Zerilli

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I am deeply honored that these four philosophers with such democratic sensibilities—Scott Pratt, Linda Zerilli, Nancy Bauer, and Amy Allen—took such care and thought in reading and responding to my essay, “Two Feminisms.” When I wrote it, I knew it would be provocative, but I never imagined it would provoke a Symposium on Race, Gender and Philosophy. I knew it was provocative in the way that Alvin Gouldner’s 1980 book, *The Two Marxisms*, was provocative: in having the audacity to take such a heterogeneous and varied field as Marxism and say that in it there were just two types, and then to proceed to enumerate which of the many varieties fell in which group. A year after Gouldner’s book came out, and just after Gouldner died, *Contemporary Sociology* published a review by Theda Skocpol (Skocpol 1981). After noting the great variety of theories that could fall under his heading of

Marxism as Critique (as opposed to Scientific Marxism), Skocpol writes,

Unfortunately, however, Gouldner does very little to elucidate the differences between voluntarist Marxisms of the non-Western world versus those of the West since World War I. Quite possibly this failure is inherent in the use of a simple bipolar typology to array all major contradictions within Marxist theory. Gouldner’s typology pivots around determinism versus voluntarism, yet other contradictory tensions—such as elitism versus democracy and an emphasis on cultural versus political superstructures—crosscut Gouldner’s master axis. (Skocpol 1981, 195)

Two of my interlocutors make a similar point about “Two Feminisms,” that it groups together unlike feminisms and in the process mischaracterizes them. My guess is that Gouldner would have replied to Skocpol in the same vein that I will here: the “two” of two Marxisms or two feminisms refers to two different large tendencies, not to two groups with isometric members. The ultimate aim of “Two Feminisms” was not to provide a taxonomy of feminism but to explain two distinctly different views of politics, power, and social change. My argument is that even with all their differences one can discern a tendency in the “first feminism” to see feminist politics as inherently oppositional and in the second to see conflict occurring within a larger frame.

AN ENVIRONING PUBLIC SPHERE

In his response, Scott Pratt helpfully describes this frame or space as “an envioning common sphere” where what might otherwise be seen as “impassable division” between “us” and “them” can be seen as situated within a larger sociosymbolic system and hence amenable to reconstruction. “At issue is the nature of dichotomies,” Pratt writes. “Dichotomous genders are products of one symbolic system and so can be challenged by challenging the system that involves them both” (Pratt, 4). This work is done within the sociosymbolic realm, as I noted in “Two Feminisms,” putting semiotic feminists in the odd position of having to use the very tools / signs that have demeaned women in order to resignify women. Pratt draws on Mary Parker Follett’s work to show how difference and opposition can be transformed (Follett 1924):

From the perspective of Follett's approach, the process of conflict and resolution recognizes the validity of dichotomy but concludes that "when we are watching an activity [of conflict and resolution] we are watching not parts in relation to a whole or whole in relation to parts, we are watching a whole-a-making." (Pratt, 4)

Perhaps the pivotal difference between the two feminisms I have charted is that one sees distinct parties engaged in a contest between parties with antithetical interests and little in common whereas the other sees a whole system "a-making," as Pratt quotes Follett describing. All change is system-wide. Opposition and difference operate within one large "enviroming public sphere" and it is the whole that needs to be addressed, not particular parties.

Anyone with any training in poststructural thought might get nervous about talk like this, talk that seems to downplay difference and seek commonality. This is the kind of talk that Fredric Jameson, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, taught me years ago (in a graduate seminar at Duke) to treat as potentially totalitarian. By suggesting that there is one of anything, even one sociosymbolic sphere, a theorist runs the risk of supporting a universalist, hegemonic discourse that elides difference. In response to that kind of criticism (but not Jameson for that's not what he himself thought), let me say that the common public sphere that I am pointing to is more like the text that Derrida described when he (in)famously said, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," or "there is nothing outside the text." This doesn't mean that there's no reality outside of texts but rather that all of life can be "read" as part of a large signifying system. It can be read, and it can be deconstructed. We cannot and need not take a view from nowhere or from outside the system to critique it; we ourselves are in it and only from within can we work to find what is being silenced. This is what I mean when I say that there is no "we/they dichotomy" and nothing outside the system. We are all born into and situated by the enviroming signifying system of the day.

To see political space as an enviroming frame does not, as Pratt notes, mean that all is peace and serenity within. There is often still sharp, seemingly impassable conflict. But a larger frame makes visible different possible interventions.

MATERIAL CONCERNS

In her response, Nancy Bauer takes exception to this kind of semiotic thinking, mistaking it to be a way of thinking that does not recognize material and lived concerns. "If we're all just nodes constituted by the signifier, then whence comes even our desire to change the way things are, let alone the necessary agency to will change?" (Bauer, 4). But a semiotic view does not maintain that "we're all just nodes constituted by the signifier" if by that she means something *merely* created and otherwise nonexistent. We come into the world as living, breathing, bodily beings, vulnerable to material circumstances as well as vulnerable to how symbolic systems shape us. A semiotic view sees that sociosymbolic systems relentlessly shape us and our desires. No sooner are we in this world than we are thrown into a sociosymbolic realm; in fact even in utero a fetus is already subjected to sounds, hormones, and other stimuli.¹ Bauer worries that a semiotic approach does not leave "any theoretical room for any kind of autonomous *self* at all" (*ibid.*). But she misses the point that what we call "selves" are beings who have emerged, and are continually emerging, for better or worse, through sociosymbolic systems. If Lacan and maybe even Hegel are right, self-consciousness is an achievement that probably occurs somewhere between six and eighteen months of age. (But absent the conditions of what we understand as human and humane

¹ I follow both Michel Foucault and Judith Butler in seeing subjectivity as both a result of being subjected to forces and to the ways we manage to perform ourselves otherwise. Both Nancy Bauer and Amy Allen note my affinity with Butler and the fact that I never mentioned her work in my essay. That was an oversight, for her work has certainly shaped my thinking, for better (as Allen would think) or worse (as Bauer suggests). The second aspect—performativity—I am becoming even more interested in. I see it at work in Linda Zerilli's 2005 book, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, which rightly tries to move feminist theory from focusing on the subject toward focusing on women's claims to freedom, a project that is very consonant with Cornell 2003. Because of my appreciation for Zerilli's project, I included a reading of it in my forthcoming book, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, right at the end of a chapter that includes a slightly revised version of "Two Feminisms." So, I see the performative aspects of the work of Butler, Cornell, and Zerilli as very much in keeping with this project.

community, what we understand as self-consciousness may never occur – consider the hypothetical case of the boy raised by wolves or the tragic case of a girl left alone in a barren room shackled to a bed post through all her formative years.) Autonomy is not something given in advance of this process; it is something that might occur. And as Drucilla Cornell argues in her brilliant essay, “Autonomy Re-Imagined” (2003), it is through the feminist work of trying to articulate desire that women’s autonomy might be achieved.

“Two Feminisms” tries to highlight the stark difference in the ways various feminisms elucidate power and oppression and try to attend to material concerns. Anyone who is moved to call herself a feminist has been subjected to discrimination, to the blatant power that men in our culture have over women, to everyday insults, to material inequality, to the scut work that falls largely on women rather than men, and if she is lucky enough to hit such heights, to the glass ceiling. And anyone who calls herself a feminist is bound to ask at some point, what is to blame for this situation? How do we elucidate this power differential? It is always tempting to blame someone, some party, or simply just men. (In intellectual circles I think it is a very small percentage of feminists who “simply blame men,” but bear with me.) Now, certainly many men are to blame for their sexism and stupidity, including those men who say that their workplace doesn’t need to hire any more women because it “already has one”. But these attitudes have deep roots. Many feminists will point to the stupidity and the blatant sexism and, yes, the material conditions that perpetuate it. With them, some feminists, like Bauer’s Simone de Beauvoir, think the next step is a “political fight,” “to engage in a battle—an *agon*, if we must—in order for independence to come about” (Bauer, 2). Another kind of feminism seeks to look deeper into the symbolic structures that we are born into that already structure such stupidity and perpetuate these material conditions. I think Simone de Beauvoir would belong here, as well. The difference between the two feminisms is not about the importance of material concerns but about how to address them.

If we really want to tend to material inequalities we need to address the sociosymbolic systems that perpetuate them. This doesn’t mean that we wait for this semiotic work to be completed before we address who is in the White House, a living wage, or the war in

Iraq; it’s to say that all such efforts should be informed by and speak to a larger understanding of the symbolic structures that perpetuate injustice. On this point, Amy Allen quotes a passage from “Two Feminisms” that doesn’t sit well with her: “Attending to sociosymbolic structures 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” (McAfee 146, Allen 3). Allen rightly notes that this statement “turns the old Marxist economic base/cultural superstructure model on its head.” She seems, as do both Zerilli and Bauer, to think that I am arguing that we should attend to the superstructure *rather* than to the base. But note that I said that we need to *begin* the semiotic work before material work will be fruitful. I certainly do not mean that we have to complete that work before we can move on or that working on signs systems should *replace* working on material conditions. I’m pointing to Althusser’s notion of “the relative autonomy of the superstructure” as opposed to a deterministic materialism (Althusser 2001). (It’s interesting that the same tension at work in Marxism—between materialistic determinism and the need for cultural intervention—is at work here.) Of course it is vital now – not later – to address the material conditions of women’s lives; but it is equally vital that this work be informed by productive conceptions of power and politics and by an understanding of how we are semiotically assigned our places in the world. If this work is not so informed, it runs the risk of fighting the wrong fights, wielding counterproductive rhetoric, and losing sight of what needs to be done.

Having read my interlocutors, it now occurs to me that *The Two Marxisms* wasn’t about two groups of Marxists but about two deep and contentious tendencies within Marxism itself: materialist and cultural. And “Two Feminisms” isn’t about two distinct groups of feminist scholars; it’s about two different conceptions of power and politics. Regarding power, the first way tends to think of it as top down whereas the second sees it more in a Foucauldian manner as running up and down and back and forth across grids of power, grids that have been structured historically and semiotically. The one-way model of power generally sees politics as having distinct

camps, with some wielding power over others, some with us and some against us. The second sees power as a force operating in a broad field in which we are all situated and also as something that can be generated by any party in the system; energy that is not just oppositional and not just “power over” but possibly “power with.” Even those who have been marginalized may well be able to create capacity (power) to change how the system operates.

Amy Allen rightly notes that the first, dyadic and one-way model of power may be one kind of, but not all of, agonistic politics. It may differ from a Gramscian model of cultural hegemony (which Mouffe, among others, prefers), though I think Gramsci’s model still sees power flowing from those who are benefiting from the current hegemony to those who are subordinated by it.² Both Amy Allen and Linda Zerilli observe that there is a distinct difference between (a) those political theorists who think that interests are formed pre-politically and that politics is the terrain in which these pre-political interests are advanced and (b) those who hold to a more subtle and semiotic Gramscian understanding of cultural hegemony (as Laclau and Mouffe did in *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy*). They are certainly right, and I wasn’t unaware of these differences when I wrote the essay. I was trying, albeit not terribly successfully, to point out a commonality among all these differences. And I used the term *agonistic* to capture that commonality. I meant something much

² Raymond Williams’ discussion of hegemony in his indispensable book, *Keywords*, is helpful here. Originally meaning the political predominance of some states over others, in Gramsci’s hands it becomes cultural hegemony of one class over another. The term is closely aligned with world-view: it creates a natural seeming “common sense” of things, but the “common” sense is really the sensibility and perspective of the dominant class. “It thus affects thinking about revolution in that it stresses not only the transfer of political or economic power, but the overthrow of a specific hegemony: that is to say an integral form of class rule which exists not only in political and economic institutions and relationships but also in active forms of experience and consciousness. This can only be done, it is argued, by creating an alternative hegemony—a new predominant practice and consciousness” (Williams, 145). In focusing on how hegemony creates cultural norms, this orientation is certainly sensitive to sociosymbolic structures. But in seeing hegemony in the context of class struggle of distinct and separate groups, it lacks the pragmatist sensibility to relations that Pratt describes.

broader than the group of self-described radical democrats; I meant to delineate the way in which a wide variety of otherwise-different feminisms see feminist politics as struggle and battle. At bottom there is a difference over the meaning of politics itself.

THE POLITICAL

A fundamental background tension in these discussions is about the meaning of politics. I have long been drawn to the distinction that Sheldon Wolin makes between politics and the political. Politics, he writes, “refers to the legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity” (Wolin 1996, 31). This is an idea of politics that partly informs what I am calling the first feminism. In contrast, Wolin describes the political as “an expression of 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” (31). This seems to be an idea that helps inform what I am calling the second feminism. These are not mutually exclusive definitions of politics—they are different perspectives on what politics can and might achieve. Most of us are realists enough to see that politics as contestation is in fact what swirls around us all the time. But I would argue that it is the possibility of the second ideal, the possibility of commonality, that motivates many people to engage in politics, a hope that even as we hash out our differences and disagreements politics might be more than a ceaseless battle over who has hegemony, that it might be something oriented to what we might provisionally and even idealistically hope to be the common good. This isn’t just speculation. As a philosopher I have been working on understanding practices of public decision-making and conflict resolution throughout the world by actually sitting in on public forums. In case after case I see that the motivating force to engage in common problem solving (politics) is the possibility that the parties might arrive at some common sense of things. I worry that what I call agonistic feminism resists the possibility or even the ideal that there might be anything like a common good. Agonistic political theory seems to be out of touch with this possibility, which is what in fact, if my observations are right, motivates democratic engagement.

Throughout “Two Feminisms” I refer to the first approach as “agonistic feminism.” I have constructed here a very big tent that includes those who never call themselves agonistic but nonetheless think that change comes about through struggle against the dominant holders of power and privilege and material inequality in society; in this tent I also locate those who call specifically for an agon approach to politics. This latter agonistic feminism seems to take its cue from Carl Schmitt’s concept of the political, which is as remote as can be from Sheldon Wolin’s concept. Where Wolin’s conception of the political pertains to the ideals that govern citizens, Schmitt’s conception of the political is in relation to nation-states (Schmitt 1996(1932)). And where Wolin’s conception holds out the possibility of “moments of commonality,” it is in such moments that Schmitt would say politics ceases. “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy,” writes Schmitt (26). The political enemy is “the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible” (27). For Schmitt, the political is by definition “the most intense and extreme antagonism” (29) and a world without antagonism would be a world without politics.

A world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics. It is conceivable that such a world might contain many very interesting antitheses and contrasts, competitions and intrigues of every kind, but there would not be a meaningful antithesis whereby men could be required to sacrifice life, authorized to shed blood, and kill other human beings. (35)

Schmitt adds that it is “irrelevant” to the definition of the political whether such a world is desirable or moral. What is crucial for him is that for the state to remain a political force it needs to be on the verge of war, promising protection to its citizens via the promise to engage in war to annihilate its enemies, even as this calls for unquestioned obedience on the part of its citizens. Citizens of a political state can see themselves as political and democratic equals

in so far as they are members of that state which stands in opposition to other states. At the heart of Schmitt’s conception of democratic citizenship is membership in a political state on the verge of war. Outside such an arrangement, there is no possibility for substantive democratic equality.

Frankly I am at a complete loss as to why this Schmittian conception of democracy and politics would appeal to anyone with any genuine democratic sensibility (see the essays in Mouffe 1999), and so perhaps my account is not as charitable as it should be and, hence, why I have long been disappointed in the work of Chantal Mouffe, who, as Linda Zerilli points out, starts with many of the very same orientations as “semiotic” feminists: poststructuralist, anti-essentialist, progressive, critical of Enlightenment rationality (including Habermas’s variety) as well as Rawlsian liberalism, and avowedly “democratic.” Yet even with so many similarities, the differences are profound, and they all come down to conceptions of power and the political. In the introduction to her book, *The Democratic Paradox*, Mouffe writes, “democratic logics entail drawing a frontier between ‘us’ and ‘them’ those who belong to the ‘demos’ and those who are outside it. This is the condition for the very exercise of democratic rights” (Mouffe 2000, 4). As I see it, the only way that this can be the “condition” for democratic rights is if they are narrowly understood as rights of membership in a body that is constituted in exclusion to other political bodies. Opposition is only necessarily inscribed *tautologically* in a system predicated on opposition. Under an alternative conception of the political, namely Wolin’s, opposition becomes an impediment to and not a condition for the political.

My argument is that even with all their differences one can discern a tendency in the “first feminism” to see feminist politics as inherently oppositional, from the relatively mild extent seen in liberal feminism to the larger extent in how Mouffe sees politics as etymologically rooted to a notion of politics as *polemos*, as oppositional *by definition*.

Political life concerns collective, public action; it aims at the construction of a “we” in a context of diversity and conflict. But to construct a “we” it must be distinguished from the “them” and that means establishing a frontier, defining an

“enemy.” Therefore while politics aims at constructing a political community and creating a unity, a fully inclusive political community and a final unity can never be realized since there will permanently be a “constitutive outside,” an exterior to the community that makes its existence possible. Antagonistic forces will never disappear and politics is characterized by conflict and division. (Mouffe 1992, 234-235)

Mouffe’s agonistic politics creates a conception of citizenship based upon imagining enemies at the gate and hence a need for vulnerable subjects to band together through a chain of equivalence (“we” are all those who are not “them”). Such citizenship is constituted through negation, not through a more affirmative and forward-looking imagination of new possibilities. It cannot imagine a politics in which war might be eliminated, for the political is nothing more than war.

The pivotal difference between the two conceptions of the political is over the possibility of coming to agreement. As Zerilli notes, agonistic political theory is put forward as a stark alternative to deliberative democratic theory, for the latter, at least in the Habermasian version, is aimed at rational agreement. This is true. Zerilli also suggests that semiotic feminism, as well as pragmatism, has much more in common with agonistic feminism than with deliberative democratic theory.

If Habermas’s version of deliberative democracy exhausted that field, Zerilli would be right. But there is much more in theory and in practice to deliberative democracy than what the rational proceduralists would have us think. In another essay I chart three models of democratic deliberation (McAfee 2004). Over and against the preference-based model emerging in the social sciences and the rational proceduralist model in philosophy, I describe an integrative, Deweyan model of deliberative democracy. In it, deliberation is not about reaching agreement (though it’s nice when that happens); it’s about weaving together our multiple and partial perspectives into a better picture of the whole and developing a sense of how we might move forward. It aims to develop better appreciation of how others see things and along the way to change our views of others’ views. This is a model that I have seen at work

in actual deliberative forums in the United States and abroad. This is a model that is indeed a very good bedfellow for semiotic feminism and it is one that I hope would woo over agonistic feminists, whenever they are ready to start seeing politics and change otherwise than as battle.

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