



### **Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics**

Sonia Kruks

*Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 2001, 224pp.*

*ISBN 0-8014-8417-0.*

### **Love and Politics: Women Politicians and the Ethics of Care**

Fiona Mackay

*Continuum, London & New York, 2001, 248pp.*

*ISBN 0-8264-4783-X.*

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Although these are very different books, they share a concern with the need for feminist philosophy and political theory to be able to give a robust account of feminist political agency. In doing this, both authors set themselves against trends in feminist thought which either disallow or deconstruct the idea of such agency on the grounds that it relies on essentialised views of what it means to be either a female or a feminist subject. In Kruks's case, this argument is pursued philosophically and relies on resurrecting existentialist accounts of subjectivity (Beauvoir, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Fanon all feature) as a counter to post-modernist and 'identity politics' conceptions of the self. In Mackay's case, this argument is pursued theoretically through bringing the 'ethics of care' and feminist democratic theory together, and empirically through a study of women politicians and what they tell us about women and political agency in the context of formal political institutions. Both books are extremely interesting and both books are, I suggest, straws in the wind which indicate the direction that feminist political theory is likely to be taking over the next few years.

Kruks's book consists of a series of six essays which were produced at different times, the thread which connects the essays is that they are all attempts 'to think through what selected aspects of existentialist phenomenology might mean for feminism, and how feminists might use existentialist phenomenology for their own ends' (p. 18). The essays can all be read independently and are structured into three parts, the first focuses on Beauvoir's work on subjectivity and agency, situating this in relation both to her contemporaries, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and to Foucault and Butler. The second part is on Sartre's work, drawing on *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, respectively, to engage in turn with current debates on feminist identity politics and epistemology. The third part, which is the most recently written, focuses on the critique of contemporary 'discursive'



conceptions of subjectivity and agency within feminist theory and the alternative possibilities provided by notions of embodied subjectivity (drawing on Merleau-Ponty) and Lugones' conception of 'playful world travelling'. Throughout all of the essays, the recurrent theme is to point to inadequacies of post-structuralist and post-modernist theories of subjectivity, agency, experience and knowledge and to offer existentialist arguments as the basis of an alternative.

It is not possible to do justice to the details of Kruks arguments in a brief review. The great strength of Kruks's book is its rich and scholarly engagement with the philosophies of Beauvoir, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. In general, I found her arguments most persuasive and interesting in the first two parts of the book which are the ones which stay closest to the texts of her existentialist mentors. She is by no means uncritical of these philosophers (Sartre in particular), but she makes an excellent case for returning to all three as resources for conceptualizing experience and agency in materially mediated but non-essentialist terms. In addition, Kruks makes a good case for feminists to resist the temptation of an identity politics which assumes *a priori* the entrenchment of differences between women, without leaving any space for commonalities to be conceptualized, let alone experienced and acted upon.

As with any book which brings together a set of essays which have their origins in different times and different projects, there is a certain sense of disconnection between the different elements of *Retrieving Experience*. Some of the chapters read as if intended for an audience of scholars of existentialism (in particular, the defence of Beauvoir against Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in Chapter One); at other points the argument is clearly targeting feminist post-modernist theorists. In the case of this latter audience, Kruks is at her most convincing in her critique of post-modernism/post-structuralism when she engages specifically with particular theorists and when she outlines the possible synergies between, for example, Butler's or Haraway's work and the existentialist approach Kruks is defending. The arguments become less convincing when post-modernism/post-structuralism is presented in an abstract general way as a mode of theorising which is obsessively deconstructive (p. 139). In the closing chapter, Kruks makes a case for the centrality of affective relations as the basis of solidarity between the different lived experiences of women. She uses the existentialist notion of lived, embodied subjectivity to articulate the idea of a felt relation to others which simultaneously respects the distinctiveness of the others' experience and which may underpin common feminist political projects (p. 175). In her conclusion, Kruks points to the necessary role of choice and imagination in the production of politically effective solidarities and therefore to the contingent, non-essentialised nature of any such feminist politics.



Mackay's book is specifically located in feminist debates over how to address problems of exclusion of women from politics within liberal democratic states. Mackay is concerned to bring state institutions and conventional power politics back into the centre of feminist political theory, which has recently tended to focus on the kinds of issues about agency and subjectivity with which Kruks is concerned. The main thesis of Mackay's book is that the standard debate between 'equality' and 'difference' in relation to issues of women's participation and representation in politics can be re-thought by combining it with insights drawn from the literature on the 'ethics of care'. This claim is substantiated through the use of an empirical case study of women politicians in Scotland and their own accounts of both the barriers that confront them and the contribution they make, as women, to the political process. The book is structured in two sections. In the first part, Mackay details the evidence on women's exclusion from politics and the current state of play in feminist debates about representation and participation. In the second part, Mackay engages critically with the arguments of Okin, Ruddick, Tronto and Sevenhuijsen and, on the basis of this engagement, argues for the value of certain key insights implicit in the ethics of care for the critique and practice of politics, in formal institutional as well as informal contexts (pp. 142–155). Mackay suggests that it is a mistake to read 'care' as relying on an essentialised notion of women's identity and that it can be seen instead as a set of virtues or practices which provide a 'resource' for feminist democratic politics.

At the end of the book, Mackay states that '— this book is an attempt to start up some conversations: between feminist political science and feminist moral and political theory; and amongst feminist academics, feminist activists and women' (p. 194). This is certainly something which the book ought to succeed in doing, in that it is written accessibly and combines empirical, theoretical and practical elements in a challenging way. I was particularly impressed by Mackay's linking of the insights of care ethics and the voices of the women politicians she had interviewed. The notions of 'privileged irresponsibility', 'integrity of practice' and 'judging with care', which are derived from care theory (Toronto and Sevenhuijsen) can be traced in the critical and constructive contribution which the women politicians make, and see themselves as making, to the practice of politics. Of course, this is not the only narrative to emerge from the women's voices. The idea that the presence of women in politics 'makes a difference' at anything other than a symbolic level remains contested both in feminist democratic theory and between women politicians. Nevertheless, Mackay provides strong grounds for the importance of a women's 'politics of presence' as a means not just of shifting political agendas but of redefining conceptions of good governance and citizenship within liberal democratic states.



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Kruks and Mackay focus on different levels of analysis in their examination of female or feminist political agency. However, in both cases, they are asking feminist theory to return to a more embodied and embedded conception of agency than is compatible either with liberal or post-modernist accounts of the subject. For some years feminist political theory has been dominated by the tendency to equate arguments for the political significance of women's 'difference' with an unacceptable essentialism. Kruks and Mackay provide suggestive alternatives to the either/or choices between essentialism and non-essentialism, equality and difference which have structured feminist theory for too long.

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