

12 FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMY

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The dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about. Although some feminists treat the dichotomy as a universal, trans-historical and trans-cultural feature of human existence, feminist criticism is primarily directed at the separation and opposition between the public and private spheres in liberal theory and practice.

The relationship between feminism and liberalism is extremely close but also exceedingly complex. The roots of both doctrines lie in the emergence of individualism as a general theory of social life; neither liberalism nor feminism is conceivable without some conception of individuals as free and equal beings, emancipated from the ascribed, hierarchical bonds of traditional society. But if liberalism and feminism share a common origin, their adherents have often been opposed over the past two hundred years. The direction and scope of feminist criticism of liberal conceptions of the public and the private have varied greatly in different phases of the feminist movement. An analysis of this criticism is made more complicated because liberalism is inherently ambiguous about the 'public' and the 'private', and feminists and liberals disagree about where and why the dividing line is to be drawn between the two spheres, or, according to certain contemporary feminist arguments, whether it should be drawn at all.

Feminism is often seen as nothing more than the completion of the liberal or bourgeois revolution, as an extension of liberal principles and rights to women as well as men. The demand for equal rights has, of course, always been an important part of feminism. However, the attempt to universalise liberalism has more far-reaching consequences than is often appreciated because, in the end, it inevitably challenges liberalism itself.¹ Liberal feminism has radical implications, not least in challenging the separation and opposition between the private and public spheres that is fundamental to liberal theory and practice. The liberal contrast between private and public is more than a distinction between two kinds of social activities. The public sphere, and the

principles that govern it, are seen as separate from, or independent of, the relationships in the private sphere. A familiar illustration of this claim is the long controversy between liberal and radical political scientists about participation, the radicals denying the liberal claim that the social inequalities of the private sphere are irrelevant to questions about the political equality, universal suffrage and associated civil liberties of the public realm.

Not all feminists, however, are liberals; 'feminism' goes far beyond liberal-feminism. Other feminists explicitly reject liberal conceptions of the private and public and see the social structure of liberalism as the political problem, not a starting point from which equal rights can be claimed. They have much in common with the radical and socialist critics of liberalism who rely on 'organic' theories (to use Benn and Gaus's terminology) but they differ sharply in their analysis of the liberal state. In short, feminists, unlike other radicals, raise the generally neglected problem of the patriarchal character of liberalism.

I. Liberalism and Patriarchalism

Benn and Gaus's account of the liberal conception of the public and the private (see Ch. 2, above) illustrates very nicely some major problems in liberal theory. They accept that the private and the public are central categories of liberalism, but they do not explain why these two terms are crucial or why the private sphere is contrasted with and opposed to the 'public' rather than the 'political' realm. Similarly, they note that liberal arguments leave it unclear whether civil society is private or public but, although they state that in both of their liberal models the family is paradigmatically private, they fail to pursue the question why, in this case, liberals usually also see civil society as private. Benn and Gaus's account of liberalism also illustrates its abstract, ahistorical character and, in what is omitted and taken for granted, provides a good example of the theoretical discussions that feminists are now sharply criticising. The account bears out Eisenstein's claim that 'the ideology of public and private life' invariably presents 'the division between public and private life, . . . as reflecting the development of the bourgeois liberal state, not the patriarchal ordering of the bourgeois state'.²

The term 'ideology' is appropriate here because the profound ambiguity of the liberal conception of the private and public obscures and mystifies the social reality it helps constitute. Feminists argue that liberalism is structured by patriarchal as well as class relations, and that

the dichotomy between the private and the public obscures the subjection of women to men within an apparently universal, egalitarian and individualist order. Benn and Gaus's account assumes that the reality of our social life is more or less adequately captured in liberal conceptions. They do not recognise that 'liberalism' is patriarchal-liberalism and that the separation and opposition of the public and private spheres is an unequal opposition between women and men. They thus take the talk of 'individuals' in liberal theory at face value although, from the period when the social contract theorists attacked the patriarchalists, liberal theorists have excluded women from the scope of their apparently universal arguments.³ One reason why the exclusion goes unnoticed is that the separation of the private and public is presented in liberal theory as if it applied to all individuals in the same way. It is often claimed — by anti-feminists today, but by feminists in the nineteenth century, most of whom accepted the doctrine of 'separate spheres' — that the two spheres are separate, but equally important and valuable. The way in which women and men are differentially located within private life and the public world is, as I shall indicate, a complex matter, but underlying a complicated reality is the belief that women's natures are such that they are properly subject to men and their proper place is in the private, domestic sphere. Men properly inhabit, and rule within, both spheres. The essential feminist argument is that the doctrine of 'separate but equal', and the ostensible individualism and egalitarianism of liberal theory, obscure the patriarchal reality of a social structure of inequality and the domination of women by men.

In theory, liberalism and patriarchalism stand irrevocably opposed to each other. Liberalism is an individualist, egalitarian, conventionalist doctrine; patriarchalism claims that hierarchical relations of subordination necessarily follow from the natural characteristics of men and women. In fact, the two doctrines were successfully reconciled through the answer given by the contract theorists in the seventeenth century to the subversive question of who counted as free and equal individuals. The conflict with the patriarchalists did not extend to women or conjugal relations; the latter were excluded from individualist arguments and the battle was fought out over the relation of adult sons to their fathers.

The theoretical basis for the liberal separation of the public and the private was provided in Locke's *Second Treatise*. He argued against Filmer that political power is conventional and can justifiably be exercised over free and equal adult individuals only with their consent. Political power must not be confused with paternal power over children in the private, family sphere, which is a natural relationship that ends at

the maturity, and hence freedom and equality, of (male) children. Commentators usually fail to notice that Locke's separation of the family and the political is also a sexual division. Although he argued that natural differences between men, such as age or talents, are irrelevant to their political equality, he agrees with Filmer's patriarchal claim that the natural differences between men and women entail the subjection of women to men or, more specifically, wives to husbands. Indeed, in Locke's statement at the beginning of the *Second Treatise* that he will show why political power is distinctive, he takes it for granted that the rule of husbands over wives is included in other (non-political) forms of power. He explicitly agrees with Filmer that a wife's subordination to her husband has a 'Foundation in Nature' and that the husband's will must prevail in the household as he is naturally 'the abler and the stronger'.⁴ But a natural subordinate cannot at the same time be free and equal. Thus women (wives) are excluded from the status of 'individual' and so from participating in the public world of equality, consent and convention.

It may appear that Locke's separation of paternal from political power can also be characterised as a separation of the private from the public. In one sense this is so: the public sphere can be seen as encompassing all social life apart from domestic life. Locke's theory also shows how the private and public spheres are grounded in opposing principles of association which are exemplified in the conflicting status of women and men; natural subordination stands opposed to free individualism. The family is based on natural ties of sentiment and blood and on the sexually ascribed status of wife and husband (mother and father). Participation in the public sphere is governed by universal, impersonal and conventional criteria of achievement, interests, rights, equality and property — liberal criteria, applicable only to men. An important consequence of this conception of private and public is that the public world, or civil society, is conceptualised and discussed in liberal theory (indeed, in almost all political theory) in abstraction from, or as separate from, the private domestic sphere.

It is important to emphasise at this point that the contemporary feminist critique of the public-private dichotomy is based on the same Lockean view of the two categories; domestic life is as paradigmatically private for feminists as it is in (this interpretation of) Locke's theory. However, feminists reject the claim that the separation of the private and the public follows inevitably from the natural characteristics of the sexes. They argue that a proper understanding of liberal social life is possible only when it is accepted that the two spheres, the domestic

(private) and civil society (public), held to be separate and opposed, are inextricably interrelated: they are the two sides of the single coin of liberal-patriarchalism.

If, at one theoretical level, feminists and liberals are in conflict over a shared conception of the public and the private, at another level they are at odds about these very categories. There is another sense in which the private and public are far from synonymous with Locke's paternal and political power. Precisely because liberalism conceptualises civil society in abstraction from ascriptive domestic life, the latter remains 'forgotten' in theoretical discussion. The separation between private and public is thus re-established as a division within civil society itself, within the world of men. The separation is then expressed in a number of different ways, not only private and public but also, for example, 'society' and 'state'; or 'economy' and 'politics'; or 'freedom' and 'coercion'; or 'social' and 'political'.⁵ Moreover, in this version of the separation of private and public, one category, the private, begins to wear the trousers (to adapt J.L. Austin's patriarchal metaphor for once in an appropriate context). The public or political aspect of civil society tends to get lost, as, for example, Wolin points out in *Politics and Vision*.⁶

The uncertain position of the public sphere develops for very good reason; the apparently universal criteria governing civil society are actually those associated with the liberal conception of the male individual, a conception which is presented as that of the individual. The individual is the owner of the property in his person, that is to say, he is seen in abstraction from his ascribed familial relations and those with his fellow men. He is a 'private' individual, but he needs a sphere in which he can exercise his rights and opportunities, pursue his (private) interests and protect and increase his (private) property. If all men ('individuals') are so to act in an orderly fashion, then, as Locke is aware, a public 'umpire' (rather than a hidden — private? — hand), or a representative, liberal state, is required to make and enforce publicly known, equitable laws. Because individualism is, as Benn and Gaus remark, 'the dominant mode of liberal theory and discourse', it is not surprising either that the private and the public appear as the 'obvious' pair of liberal categories, or that the public gets stripped of its trousers and civil society is seen, above all else, as the sphere of private interest, private enterprise and private individuals.⁷

In the late twentieth century the relation between the capitalist economy and the state no longer looks like that between Locke's umpire and civil society and confusion abounds about the boundary be-

tween the private and public. But the confusion is unlikely to be remedied from within a theory which 'forgets' that it includes another boundary between private and public. One solution is to reinstate the political in public life. This is the response of Wolin or of Habermas in his rather opaque discussion of the 'principle' of the public sphere, where citizens can form reasoned political judgements.⁸ Unlike these theorists, feminist critiques insist that an alternative to the liberal conception must also encompass the relationship between public and domestic life. The question that feminists raise is why the patriarchal character of the separation of a depoliticised public sphere from private life is so easily 'forgotten'; why is the separation of the two worlds located within civil society so that public life is implicitly conceptualised as the sphere of men?

The answer to this question can be found only by examining the history of the connection between the separation of production from the household and the emergence of the family as paradigmatically private. When Locke attacked (one aspect of) patriarchy, husbands were heads of households but their wives played an active, independent part in numerous areas of production. As capitalism and its specific form of sexual as well as class division of labour developed, however, wives were pushed into a few, low-status areas of employment or kept out of economic life altogether, relegated to their 'natural', dependent, place in the private, familial sphere.⁹ Today, despite a large measure of civil equality, it appears natural that wives are subordinate just because they are dependent on their husbands for subsistence, and it is taken for granted that liberal social life can be understood without reference to the sphere of subordination, natural relations and women. The old patriarchal argument from nature and women's nature was thus transformed as it was modernised and incorporated into liberal capitalism. Theoretical and practical attention became fixed exclusively on the public area, on civil society — on 'the social' or on 'the economy' — and domestic life was assumed irrelevant to social and political theory or the concerns of men of affairs. The fact that patriarchy is an essential, indeed constitutive, part of the theory and practice of liberalism remains obscured by the apparently impersonal, universal dichotomy between private and public within civil society itself.

The intimate relation between the private and the natural is obscured when, as in Benn and Gaus's account, the private and the public are discussed in abstraction from their historical development and also from other ways of expressing this fundamental structural separation within liberalism. I have already observed that, when the separation is

located within civil society, the dichotomy between private and public is referred to in a variety of ways (and a full account of liberalism would have to explain these variations). Similarly, the feminist understanding of the private and the public, and the feminist critique of their separation and opposition, are sometimes presented in these terms, but the argument is also formulated using the categories of nature and culture, or personal and political, or morality and power, and, of course, women and men and female and male. In popular (and academic) consciousness the duality of female and male often serves to encapsulate or represent the series (or circle) of liberal separations and oppositions: female, or — nature, personal, emotional, love, private, intuition, morality, ascription, particular, subjection; male, or — culture, political, reason, justice, public, philosophy, power, achievement, universal, freedom. The most fundamental and general of these oppositions associates women with nature and men with culture, and several contemporary feminists have framed their critiques in these terms.

II. Nature and Culture

Patriarchy rests on the appeal to nature and the claim that women's natural function of childbearing prescribes their domestic and subordinate place in the order of things. J.S. Mill wrote in the nineteenth century that the depth of the feelings surrounding the appeal to nature was 'the most intense and most deeply-rooted of all those which gather round and protect old institutions and customs'.¹⁰ In the 1980s, when women in the liberal democracies have won citizenship and a large measure of legal equality with men, the arguments of the organised anti-feminist movement illustrate that the appeal to nature has lost none of its resonance. From the seventeenth century a question has been persistently asked by a few female voices: 'if all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?'¹¹ The usual answer, vigorously presented by Mary Wollstonecraft in the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, and today by feminist critics of the sexism of children's books, schooling and the media, is that what are called women's natural characteristics are actually, in Wollstonecraft's phrase, 'artificial', a product of women's education or lack of it. However, even the most radical changes in educational practice will not affect women's natural, biological capacity to bear children. This difference between the sexes is independent of history and culture, and so it is perhaps not surprising that the natural difference, and the opposition

between (women's) nature and (men's) culture, has been central to some well-known feminist attempts to explain the apparently universal subordination of women. Arguments focusing on nature/culture fall into two broad categories, the anthropological and the radical feminist.¹²

In one of the most influential anthropological discussions, Ortner argues that the only way to explain why the value universally assigned to women and their activities is lower than that assigned to men and their pursuits is that women are 'a symbol' of all 'that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself'.¹³ That is, women and domestic life symbolise nature. Humankind attempts to transcend a merely natural existence so that nature is always seen as of a lower order than culture. Culture becomes identified as the creation and the world of men because women's biology and bodies place them closer to nature than men, and because their childbearing and domestic tasks, dealing with unsocialised infants and with raw materials, bring them into closer contact with nature. Women and the domestic sphere thus appear inferior to the cultural sphere and male activities, and women are seen as necessarily subordinate to men.

It is unclear whether Ortner is arguing that women's domestic activities symbolise nature, are part of nature or, rather, place women in a mediating position between nature and culture. She argues that the opposition between women/nature and men/culture is itself a cultural construct and not given in nature; 'Woman is not "in reality" any closer to (or further from) nature than man — both have consciousness, both are mortal. But there are certainly reasons why she appears that way'.¹⁴ However, Ortner fails to give sufficient weight to the fundamental fact that men and women are social and cultural beings, or to its corollary that 'nature' always has a social meaning, a meaning that, moreover, varies widely in different societies and in different historical periods. Even if women and their tasks have been universally devalued, it does not follow that we can understand this important fact of human existence by asking questions in universal terms and looking for general answers formulated in terms of universal dichotomies. The distinction between domestic, private women's life and the public world of men does not have the same meaning in pre-modern European society as in present liberal-capitalism, and to see both the latter and hunter-gatherer societies from the perspective of a general opposition between nature and culture, or public and private, can lead only to an emphasis on biology or 'nature'. Rosaldo recently criticised arguments about women's subordination that, like Ortner's, implicitly rest on the question,

'How did it begin?' She points out that to seek a universally applicable answer inevitably opposes 'woman' to 'man', and gives rise to a separation of domestic life from 'culture' or 'society' because of the 'presumably panhuman functions' thus attributed to women.¹⁵

The most thorough attempt to find a universal answer to the question of why it is that women are in subjection to men, and the most stark opposition between nature and culture, can be found in the writings of the radical feminists who argue that nature is the single cause of men's domination. The best known version of this argument is Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, which also provides an example of how one form of feminist argument, while attacking the liberal separation of private and public, remains within the abstractly individualist framework which helps constitute this division of social life. Firestone reduces the history of the relation between nature and culture or private and public to an opposition between female and male. She argues that the origin of the dualism lies in 'biology itself — procreation',¹⁶ a natural or original inequality that is the basis of the oppression of women and the source of male power. Men, by confining women to reproduction (nature), have freed themselves 'for the business of the world'¹⁷ and so have created and controlled culture. The proposed solution is to eliminate natural differences (inequalities) between the sexes by introducing artificial reproduction. 'Nature' and the private sphere of the family will then be abolished and individuals, of all ages, will interact as equals in an undifferentiated cultural (or public) order.

The popular success of *The Dialectic of Sex* owes more to the need for women to continue to fight for control of their bodies and reproductive capacity than to its philosophical argument. The key assumption of the book is that women necessarily suffer from 'a fundamentally oppressive biological condition',¹⁸ but biology, in itself, is neither oppressive nor liberating; biology, or nature, becomes either a source of subjection or free creativity for women only because it has meaning within specific social relationships. Firestone's argument reduces the social conceptions of 'women' and 'men' to the biological categories of 'female' and 'male', and thus denies any significance to the complex history of the relationship between men and women or between the private and public spheres. She relies on an abstract conception of a natural, biological female individual with a reproductive capacity which puts her at the mercy of a male individual, who is assumed to have a natural drive to subjugate her.¹⁹ This contemporary version of a thorough Hobbesian reduction of individuals to their natural state leads to a theoretical dead-end, not perhaps a surprising conclusion

to an argument that implicitly accepts the patriarchal claim that women's subordination is decreed by nature. The way forward will not be found in a universal dichotomy between nature and culture, or between female and male individuals. Rather, as Rosaldo argues, it is necessary to develop a feminist theoretical perspective that takes account of the social relationships between women and men in historically specific structures of domination and subordination; and, it might be added, within the context of specific interpretations of the 'public' and 'private'.

III. Morality and Power

The long struggle to enfranchise women is one of the most important theoretical and practical examples of feminist attacks on the dichotomy between the private and public. Suffragist arguments show how the attempt to universalise liberal principles leads to a challenge to liberalism itself, and this is particularly well, if implicitly, illustrated in the writing of J.S. Mill. Despite the enormous amount of attention given to voting over the past thirty years, remarkably little attention has been paid by either theoretical or empirical students of politics to the political meaning and consequences of manhood and womanhood suffrage. In recent feminist literature, however, two different views can be found about the implications of the enfranchisement of women for the separation between the public and the private. There is disagreement whether the suffrage movement served to reinforce the sexual separation in social life or whether, rather despite itself, it was one means of undermining it. In the mid-nineteenth century, when feminism emerged as an organised social and political movement, the argument from nature had been elaborated into the doctrine of separate spheres; men and women, it was claimed, each naturally had a separate but complementary and equally valuable social place. The most striking difference between the early feminists and suffragists and contemporary feminists is that almost everyone in the nineteenth century accepted the doctrine of separate spheres.

The early feminists bitterly opposed the grossly unequal position of women but the reforms they struggled to achieve, such as an end to the legal powers of husbands that made their wives into private property and civil non-persons, and the opportunity to obtain an education so that single women could support themselves, were usually seen as means to equality for women who would remain within their own private

sphere. The implicit assumption was that the suffrage, too, meant different things to men and women. This comes out clearly in one of the most passionately sentimental, and anti-feminist, statements of the doctrine of separate spheres. In 'Of Queens' Gardens', Ruskin argues that,

the man's duty, as a member of the commonwealth, is to assist in the maintenance, in the advance, in the defence of the state. The woman's duty, as a member of the commonwealth, is to assist in the ordering, in the comforting, and in the beautiful adornment of the state.²⁰

Citizenship for women could thus be seen as an elaboration of their private, domestic tasks and one of the suffragists' main arguments was that the vote was a necessary means to protect and strengthen women's special sphere (an argument that gained weight at the end of the century as legislatures increasingly interested themselves in social issues related to women's sphere). Moreover, both the most ardent anti-suffragists and vehement suffragists agreed that women were weaker, but more moral and virtuous, than men. The anti-suffragists argued that, therefore, enfranchisement would fatally weaken the state because women could not bear arms or use force; the suffragists countered by claiming that women's superior morality and rectitude would transform the state and usher in a reign of peace. All this has led Elstain to argue that it was precisely because the suffragists accepted the assumptions of the doctrine of separate spheres that they 'failed, even on their own terms'. Far from raising a challenge to the separation of the public and private, they merely 'perpetuated the very mystifications and unexamined presumptions which served to rig the system against them'.²¹

Much of Elstain's argument is conducted in terms of the duality of morality and power, one way of formulating the separation of private and public when this is located *within* civil society. Liberal theorists often contrast the political sphere (the state), the sphere of power, force and violence, with the society (the private realm), the sphere of voluntarism, freedom and spontaneous regulation.²² However, the argument about the implications of women's moral superiority, and Elstain's use of the duality of morality and power, refer rather to the more fundamental separation of the private, domestic sphere from public life or civil society. The opposition between morality and power then counterposes physical force and aggression, the natural attributes

of manliness, which are seen as exemplified in the military force of the state, against love and altruism, the natural attributes of womanhood, which are, paradigmatically, displayed in domestic life where the wife and mother stands as the guardian of morality.²³ Was the struggle for womanhood suffrage locked in the separation and dichotomies of patriarchal liberalism, within the duality of morality and power (which, again, is one way of expressing the doctrine of separate spheres), to the extent suggested by Elshaint? To vote is, after all, a political act. Indeed, it has come to be seen as *the* political act of a liberal-democratic citizen, and citizenship is a status of formal civil or public equality.

A different assessment of the suffrage movement is presented in recent work by DuBois, who argues that the reason that both sides of the struggle for enfranchisement saw the vote as the key feminist demand was that the vote gave women

a connection with the social order not based on the institution of the family and their subordination within it . . . As citizens and voters, women would participate directly in society as individuals, not indirectly through their subordinate position as wives and mothers.²⁴

DuBois emphasises that the suffragists did not question women's 'peculiar suitability' for domestic life, but the demand for the vote constituted a denial that women were naturally fit *only* for private life. The demand for the suffrage thus reached to the heart of the mutual accommodation between patriarchy and liberalism since to win the vote meant that, in one respect at least, women must be admitted as 'individuals'. This is why DuBois can argue that women's claim for a public, equal status with men, 'exposed and challenged the assumption of male authority over women'.²⁵ An important long-term consequence of women's enfranchisement, and the other reforms that have led to women's present position of (almost) formal political and legal equality with men, is that the contradiction between civil equality and social, especially familial, subjection, including the beliefs that help constitute it, is now starkly revealed. The liberal-patriarchal separation of the public and private spheres has become a political problem.

The dimensions of the problem are set out — very clearly with the benefit of hindsight — in John Stuart Mill's feminist essay *The Subjection of Women* and his arguments for womanhood suffrage. Mill's essay shows that the assumption that an individual political status can be added to women's ascribed place in the private sphere and leave the lat-

ter intact, or even strengthened, is ultimately untenable. Or, to make this point another way, liberal principles cannot simply be universalised to extend to women in the public sphere without raising an acute problem about the patriarchal structure of private life. Mill shows theoretically, as the feminist movement has revealed in practice, that the spheres are integrally related and that women's full and equal membership in public life is impossible without changes in the domestic sphere.

In the *Subjection*, Mill argues that the relation between men and women, or more specifically between husbands and wives, forms an unjustified and unjustifiable exception to the liberal principles of individual freedom and equality, free choice, equality of opportunity and allocation of occupations by merit that (he believes) govern other social and political institutions in nineteenth-century Britain. The social subordination of women is 'a single relic of an old world of thought and practice exploded in everything else'.²⁶ At the beginning of the essay Mill attacks the appeal to nature and argues that nothing can be known about the natural differences, if any, between women and men until evidence is available about their respective attributes within relationships and institutions where they interact as equals instead of as superiors and inferiors. Much of Mill's argument is directed against the legally sanctioned powers of husbands which placed them in the position of slave-masters over their wives. Legal reform should turn the family from a 'school of despotism' into a 'school of sympathy in equality' and a 'real school of the virtues of freedom'.²⁷ However, as recent feminist critics have pointed out, in the end he falls back on the same argument from nature that he criticises. Although Mill argues that in the prevailing circumstances of women's upbringing, lack of education and occupational opportunities, and legal and social pressures, they do not have a free choice whether or not to marry, he also assumes that, even after social reform, most women will still choose marital dependence. He states that it will generally be understood that when a woman marries she has chosen her 'career', just like a man entering a profession:

she makes choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a family, as the first call upon her exertions . . . She renounces [all occupations] not consistent with the requirements of this.²⁸

The question why, if marriage is a 'career', liberal arguments about (public) equality of opportunity have any relevance to women, is thus neatly begged.

Mill introduced the first measure for womanhood suffrage into the House of Commons in 1867. He advocated votes for women for the same two reasons that he supported manhood suffrage; because it was necessary for self-protection or the protection of interests and because political participation would enlarge the capacities of women. However, it is not usually appreciated that Mill's acceptance of a sexually ascribed division of labour, or the separation of domestic from public life, cuts the ground from under his argument for enfranchisement. The obvious difficulty for his argument is that women as wives will be largely confined to the small circle of the family so they will find it hard to use their votes to protect their interests. Women will not be able to learn what their interests are without experience outside domestic life. This point is even more crucial for Mill's argument about individual development and education through political participation. Mill, in what Benn and Gaus call his 'representative liberal text', refers to the development of a 'public spirit' by citizens.²⁹ In the *Subjection* he writes of the elevation of the individual 'as a moral, spiritual and social being' that occurs under 'the ennobling influence' of free government.³⁰ This is a large claim to make for the periodic casting of a ballot and Mill did not think that such consequences would arise from the suffrage alone. He writes that 'citizenship', and here I take him to be referring to universal suffrage, 'fills only a small place in modern life, and does not come near the daily habits or inmost sentiments'.³¹ He goes on to argue that the (reformed) family is the real school of freedom. However, this is no more plausible than the claim about liberal democratic voting. A despotic, patriarchal family is no school for democratic citizenship; but neither can the egalitarian family, on its own, substitute for participation in a wide variety of social institutions (especially the workplace) that Mill, in his other social and political writings, argues is the necessary education for citizenship. How can wives who have 'chosen' private life develop a public spirit? Women will thus exemplify the selfish, private beings, lacking a sense of justice, who result, according to Mill, when individuals have no experience of public life.

Mill's ultimate failure to question the 'natural' sexual division of labour undermines his argument for an equal public status for women. His argument in the *Subjection* rests on an extension of liberal principles to the domestic sphere — which immediately brings the separation of the private and public, and the opposition between the principles of association in the two spheres into question. He would not have remained Benn and Gaus's 'exemplary' liberal theorist if he had not, at least in part, upheld the patriarchal-liberal ideology of the

separation between public and private. On the other hand, by throwing doubt on the original Lockean separation of paternal and political power, and by arguing that the same political principles apply to the structure of family life as to political life, Mill also raises a large question about the status of the family. The language of 'slaves', 'masters', 'equality', 'freedom' and 'justice' implies that the family is a conventional not a natural association. Mill would not want to draw the conclusion that the family is political, but many contemporary feminists have done so. The most popular slogan of today's feminist movement is 'the personal is the political', which not only explicitly rejects the liberal separation of the private and public, but also implies that no distinction can or should be drawn between the two spheres.

IV. 'The Personal Is the Political'

The slogan 'the personal is the political' provides a useful point from which to comment on some of the ambiguities of the public and private in liberal-patriarchalism and also, in the light of some of its more literal feminist interpretations, to comment further on an alternative feminist conception of the political. Its major impact has been to unmask the ideological character of liberal claims about the private and public. 'The personal is the political' has drawn women's attention to the way in which we are encouraged to see social life in personal terms, as a matter of individual ability or luck in finding a decent man to marry or an appropriate place to live. Feminists have emphasised how personal circumstances are structured by public factors, by laws about rape and abortion, by the status of 'wife' by policies on childcare and the allocation of welfare benefits and the sexual division of labour in the home and workplace. 'Personal' problems can thus be solved only through political means and political action.

The popularity of the slogan and its strength for feminists arises from the complexity of women's position in contemporary liberal-patriarchal societies. The private or personal and the public or political are held to be separate from and irrelevant to each other; women's everyday experience confirms this separation yet, simultaneously, it denies it and affirms the integral connection between the two spheres. The separation of the private and public is both part of our actual lives and an ideological mystification of liberal-patriarchal reality.

The separation of the private domestic life of women from the public world of men has been constitutive of patriarchal-liberalism from its

origins and, since the mid-nineteenth century, the economically dependent wife has been presented as the ideal for all respectable classes of society. The identification of women and the domestic sphere is now also being reinforced by the revival of anti-feminist organisations and the 'scientific' reformulation of the argument from nature by the sociobiologists.³² Women have never been completely excluded, of course, from public life; but the way in which women are included is grounded, as firmly as their position in the domestic sphere, in patriarchal beliefs and practices. For example, even many anti-suffragists were willing for women to be educated, so that they could be good mothers, and for them to engage in local politics and philanthropy because these activities could be seen, as voting could not, as a direct extension of their domestic tasks. Today, women still have, at best, merely token representation in authoritative public bodies; public life, while not entirely empty of women, is still the world of men and dominated by them.

Again, large numbers of working class wives have always had to enter the public world of paid employment to ensure the survival of their families, and one of the most striking features of post-war capitalism has been the employment of a steadily increasing number of married women. However, their presence serves to highlight the patriarchal continuity that exists between the sexual division of labour in the family and the sexual division of labour in the workplace. Feminist research has shown how women workers are concentrated into a few occupational areas ('women's work') in low-paid, low-status and non-supervisory jobs.³³ Feminists have also drawn attention to the fact that discussions of worklife, whether by *laissez-faire* liberals or Marxists, always assume that it is possible to understand economic activity in abstraction from domestic life. It is forgotten that the worker, invariably taken to be a man, can appear ready for work and concentrate on his work free from the everyday demands of providing food, washing and cleaning, and care of children, only because these tasks are performed unpaid by his wife. And if she is also a paid worker, she works a further shift at these 'natural' activities. A complete analysis and explanation of the structure and operation of capitalism will be forthcoming only when the figure of the worker is accompanied by that of the housewife.

Feminists conclude that the 'separate' liberal worlds of private and public life are actually interrelated, connected by a patriarchal structure. This conclusion again highlights the problem of the status of the 'natural' sphere of the family, which is presupposed by, yet seen as

separate from and irrelevant to, the conventional relations of civil society. The sphere of domestic life is at the heart of civil society rather than apart or separate from it. A widespread conviction that this is so is revealed by contemporary concern about the crisis, the decline, the disintegration of the nuclear family that is seen as the bulwark of civilised moral life. That the family is a major 'social problem' is significant, for the 'social' is a category that belongs in civil society, not outside it, or, more accurately, it is one of the two sides into which civil society can be divided; the social (private) and the political (public). Donzelot has recently explored how the emergence of the social is also the emergence of 'social work' and a wide variety of ways of (politically) 'policing' the family, giving mothers a social status, and controlling children.³⁴ Feminists, too, have been investigating how personal and family life is politically regulated, an investigation which denies the conventional liberal claim that the writ of the state runs out at the gate to the family home. They have shown how the family is a major concern of the state and how, through legislation concerning marriage and sexuality and the policies of the welfare state, the subordinate status of women is presupposed by and maintained by the power of the state.³⁵

These feminist critiques of the dichotomy between private and public stress that the categories refer to two interrelated dimensions of the structure of liberal-patriarchalism; they do not necessarily suggest that no distinction can or should be drawn between the personal and political aspects of social life. The slogan 'the personal is the political' can, however, be taken literally. For example, Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, implicitly rejects Locke's distinction between paternal and political power. In political science the political is frequently defined in terms of power, but political scientists invariably fail to take their definition to its logical conclusion. Millett agrees with the definition but, in contrast, argues that all power is political so that, because men exercise power over women in a multitude of ways in personal life, it makes sense to talk of 'sexual politics' and 'sexual domination . . . provides [the] most fundamental concept of power'.³⁶ The personal becomes the political. This approach illuminates many unpalatable aspects of sexual and domestic life, in particular its violence, that too frequently remain hidden, but it does not greatly advance the critique of patriarchal-liberalism. As the radical feminist attempts to eliminate nature, as one side of the dichotomy, so Millett seeks to eliminate power, thus echoing the suffragist vision of a moral transformation of politics. But this does nothing to question the liberal association (or

identification) of the political with power, or to question the association of women with the 'moral' side of the duality.

Other feminists have also rejected the identification of the political with power. Sometimes, by standing liberal-patriarchalism on its head, it is merely claimed that, properly understood, political life is thus intrinsically feminine.³⁷ More fruitfully, the feminist rejection of 'masculine' power also rests on an alternative conception of the political. It is argued that the political is the 'area of shared values and citizenship',³⁸ or that it 'includes shared values and civic concerns in which power is only one aspect'.³⁹ These conceptions remain undeveloped in feminist writings, but they are closely related to the arguments of the critics of liberalism who deplore the depoliticisation of civil society or liberalism's loss of distinctive sense of the political. For instance, Habermas argues for public, shared communication so that substantive political problems can be rationally evaluated, and Wolin states that the 'public' and the 'common' are 'synonyms for what is political', so that 'one of the essential qualities of what is political . . . is its relationship to what is "public"'.⁴⁰ These critics and some feminists agree that what is not personal is public — and that what is public is political. The implication is that there is no division within civil society, which is the realm of the public, collective, common political life of the community. The argument is usually developed, however, without any consideration of how this conception of the public-political sphere is related to domestic life, or any indication that such a problem arises. The feminists have posed, but have not yet answered, this fundamental question. What can be said is that although the personal is not the political, the two spheres are interrelated, necessary dimensions of a future, democratic feminist social order.

V. Conditions for a Feminist Alternative to Liberal-Patriarchalism

Feminist critiques of the liberal-patriarchal opposition of private and public raise fundamental theoretical questions, as well as the complex practical problems of creating a radical social transformation. But one objection to feminist arguments denies that our project is even sensible. Wolff has recently claimed, from a position sympathetic to feminism, that overcoming the separation of the two spheres presents an inherently

separation of public and private derives from two 'equally plausible and totally incompatible conceptions of human nature'. One is that of 'man [sic] as essentially rational, atemporal, ahistorical', and the second is of 'man as essentially time bound, historically, culturally and biologically conditioned'.⁴¹ To argue that everyone should be treated in the public world as if the facts of sex, class, colour, age and religion do not count, is to insist that we should deny the most basic human facts about ourselves and thus accentuate the inhumanity and alienation of the present. But Wolff's two conceptions are not of a single 'human' nature, and they are far from equally plausible; they represent the liberal-patriarchal view of the true natures of (private) women and (public) men. Human beings *are* time bound, biological and culturally specific creatures. Only from a liberal individualist perspective (one failing to see itself as a patriarchal perspective) that abstracts the male individual from the sphere where his wife remains in natural subjection, then generalises this abstraction as public man, can such an opposition of 'human' nature, of women and men, private and public, appear philosophically or sociologically plausible.

Feminists are trying to develop a theory of a social practice that, for the first time in the western world, would be a truly general theory — including women and men equally — grounded in the interrelationship of the individual to collective life, or personal to political life, instead of their separation and opposition. At the immediately practical level, this demand is expressed in what is perhaps the most clear conclusion of feminist critiques; that if women are to participate fully, as equals, in social life, men have to share equally in childrearing and other domestic tasks. While women are identified with this 'private' work, their public status is always undermined. This conclusion does not, as is often alleged, deny the natural biological fact that women not men *bear* children; it does deny the patriarchal assertion that this natural fact entails that only women can *rear* children. Equal parenting and equal participation in the other activities of domestic life presuppose some radical changes in the public sphere, in the organisation of production, in what we mean by 'work', and in the practice of citizenship. The feminist critique of the sexual division of labour in the workplace and in political organisations of all ideological persuasions, and its rejection of the liberal-patriarchal conception of the political, extends and deepens the challenge to liberal-capitalism posed by the participatory democratic and Marxist criticism of the past two decades, but

women are to take their place as public 'individuals' then the conflict is about the universalisation of liberalism. But that is to ignore the feminist achievement in bringing to light the patriarchal character of liberalism and the ambiguities and contradictions of its conception of the private and public. A full analysis of the various expressions of the dichotomy between the private and the public has yet to be provided, together with a deeper exploration than is possible in this essay of the implications of the double separation of domestic life from civil society and the separation of the private from public within civil society itself. Feminist critiques imply a dialectical perspective upon social life as an alternative to the dichotomies and oppositions of patriarchal-liberalism. It is tempting, as shown by feminists themselves, either to replace opposition by negation (to deny that nature has any place in a feminist order) or to assume that the alternative to opposition is harmony and identification (the personal is the political; the family is political). The assumptions of patriarchal-liberalism allow only these two alternatives, but feminist critiques assume that there is a third.

Feminism looks toward a differentiated social order within which the various dimensions are distinct but not separate or opposed, and which rests on a social conception of individuality, which includes both women and men as biologically differentiated but not unequal creatures. Nevertheless, women and men, and the private and the public, are not necessarily in harmony. Given the social implications of women's reproductive capacities,⁴² it is surely Utopian to suppose that tension between the personal and the political, between love and justice, between individuality and communality will disappear with patriarchal-liberalism.

The range of philosophical and political problems that are encompassed, implicitly or explicitly, in feminist critiques indicates that a fully developed feminist alternative to patriarchal-liberalism would provide its first truly 'total critique'.⁴³ Three great male critics of abstractly individualist liberalism already claim to have offered such a critique, but their claim must be rejected. Rousseau, Hegel and Marx each argued that they had left behind the abstractions and dichotomies of liberalism and retained individuality within communality. Rousseau and Hegel explicitly excluded women from this endeavour, confining these politically dangerous beings to the obscurity of the natural world of the family; Marx also failed to free himself and his philosophy from patriarchal assumptions. The feminist total critique of the liberal opposition of private and public still awaits its philosopher.

Notes

I am grateful to Stanley Benn and Jerry Gaus for the care with which they read and criticised my arguments.

1. The subversive character of liberal-feminism has recently been uncovered by Z. Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Longman, New York, 1981).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

3. J.S. Mill is an exception to this generalisation, but Benn and Gaus do not mention *The Subjection of Women*. It might be objected that B. Bosanquet, for example, refers in *The Philosophical Theory of the State* (Ch. X, 6), to 'the two persons who are [the] head' of the family. However, Bosanquet is discussing Hegel, and he shows no understanding that Hegel's philosophy rests on the explicit, and philosophically justified, exclusion of women from headship of a family or from participating in civil society or the state. Bosanquet's reference to 'two persons' thus requires a major critique of Hegel, not mere exposition. Liberal arguments cannot be universalised by a token reference to 'women and men' instead of 'men'. On Hegel see P. Mills, 'Hegel and "The Woman Question": Recognition and Intersubjectivity', in L. Clark and L. Lange (eds.), *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1979). (I am grateful to Jerry Gaus for drawing my attention to Bosanquet's remarks.)

4. J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2nd edn, P. Laslett (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1967), Bk. I, Ch. 47; Bk. II, Ch. 82. The conflict between the social contract theorists and the patriarchalists is more fully discussed in T. Brennan and C. Pateman, 'Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth': Women and the Origins of Liberalism', *Political Studies*, XXVII (1979), pp. 183-200.

5. Rawls's two principles of justice provide an example of this division. He states that the principles 'presuppose that the social structure can be divided into two more or less distinct parts'. He does not call these private and public, but the 'equal liberties of citizenship' are usually called 'political' liberties and the 'social and economic inequalities' of the second part are usually seen as part of the 'private' sphere. In Rawls's final formulation it is clear that the principles refer to civil society and that the family is outside their scope. Part (b) of the second principle, equality of opportunity, cannot apply to the family, and part (a), the difference principle, may not apply. A clever, but silly, may be sent to university at the expense of other family members. (I owe this last point to my student Deborah Kearns.) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 61, 302.

6. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Little Brown, Boston, 1960).

7. It is also the sphere of privacy. J. Reiman, 'Privacy, Intimacy, and Personhood', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6 (1976), p. 39, links 'owning' one's body to the idea of a 'self' and argues this is why privacy is needed. My comments in the text do not explain why liberal theorists typically write of the private and the public rather than the political. An explanation could only be found in a full examination of liberal ambiguities about the public and the political, which takes us far from the purpose of this essay, although the problem arises again below in the context of the feminist slogan 'the personal is the political'.

8. J. Habermas, 'The Public Sphere', *New German Critique*, VI, no. 3 (1974), pp. 49-55. However, Habermas, like other writers, ignores the fact that women are conventionally held to be deficient in reason and so unfit to participate in a public body.

9. In the present context these remarks must be very condensed. For amplification see Brennan and Pateman, 'Mere Auxiliaries to the Commonwealth'.

- Women and the Origins of Liberalism'; R. Hamilton, *The Liberation of Women: A Study of Patriarchy and Capitalism* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1978); H. Hartmann, 'Capitalism, Patriarchy and Job Segregation by Sex', *Signs*, 1, no. 3, Pt. 2 (Spring 1976) pp. 137-70; A. Oakley, *Housewife* (A. Lane, London, 1974), Chs. 2 and 3.
10. J.S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women* in A. Rossi (ed.), *Essays on Sex Equality* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970), pp. 125-242, at p. 126.
11. M. Astell, 'Reflections on Marriage' (published 1706), cited in L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1977), p. 240.
12. 'Radical feminists' is the term used to distinguish the feminists who argue that the male-female opposition is the cause of women's oppression from liberal feminists' and 'socialist feminists'.
13. S.B. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1974), p. 72. Ortner says nothing about the writers over the past two centuries who have glorified nature and seen culture as the cause of vice and inequality. However, the meaning of 'nature' in these arguments is extremely complex and the relationship of women to nature is far from clear. Rousseau, for instance, segregates women and men even in domestic life because women's natures are seen as a threat to civil life (culture). For some comments on this question see my 'The Disorder of Women': Women, Love and the Sense of Justice', *Ethics*, 91 (1980), pp. 20-34.
14. Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture', p. 87.
15. M.Z. Rosaldo, 'The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism, and Cross-Cultural Understanding', *Signs*, 5, no. 3 (1980), p. 409. Compare D. Haraway, 'Animal Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body Politic, Part I: A Political Physiology of Dominance', *Signs*, 4, no. 1 (1978), pp. 24-25.
16. S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (W. Morrow, New York, 1970), p. 8.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 232. She also fails to distinguish 'culture' as art, technology etc. from 'culture' as the general form of life of humankind.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
19. I owe the last point to J.B. Elshtain, 'Liberal Heresies: Existentialism and Repressive Feminism' in M. McGrath (ed.), *Liberalism and the Modern Policy* (Marcel Dekker, New York, 1978), p. 53.
20. J. Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens', in C. Bauer and L. Pitt (eds.), *Free and Ennobled* (Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1979), p. 17.
21. J.B. Elshtain, 'Moral Woman and Immoral Man: A Consideration of the Public-Private Split and its Political Ramifications', *Politics and Society*, 4 (1974), pp. 453-61.
22. A recent argument that relies on this contrast is J. Steinberg, *Locke, Rousseau and the Idea of Consent* (Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1978), esp. Chs. 5-7. Emphasis on consent gives an appearance of morality to the private sphere, which is far less evident when, as is usually the case, self-interest is seen as the governing principle of (private) civil society. If the division within civil society is seen as freedom (as self-interest) opposing power, the location of morality within domestic life is more pointed but poses a serious problem of order for liberal public or civil society.
23. An acute problem about 'nature' and women's 'nature' now emerges because women are seen both as natural guardians of morality and as naturally politically subversive: see my 'Disorder of Women'.
24. E. DuBois, 'The Radicalism of the Woman Suffrage Movement', *Feminist Studies*, 3, no. 1/2 (1975), pp. 64, 66.
25. E. DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), p. 46.
26. Mill, *Subjection*, p. 146.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-75.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
29. See Ch. 2, p. 303 above, referring to Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*.
30. Mill, *Subjection*, p. 237.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
32. On sociobiology see, e.g., E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1975), and S. Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, 2nd edn (W. Morrow, New York, 1974). For a critique, see, e.g., P. Green, *The Pursuit of Inequality* (Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1981), Ch. 5.
33. See, e.g., for Australia, K. Hargreaves, *Women at Work* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1982); for England, J. West (ed.), *Women, Work and the Labour Market* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982); for America, Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, Ch. 9.
34. J. Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (Pantheon Books, New York, 1979). 'The most surprising thing is the status "the social" has won in our heads, as something we take for granted' (p. xxvii).
35. On marriage see, e.g., D.L. Barker, 'The Regulation of Marriage: Repressive Benevolence' in G. Littlejohn et al. (eds.), *Power and the State* (Croom Helm, London, 1978); on rape see my 'Women and Consent', *Political Theory*, 8 (1980), pp. 149-68, and A.G. Johnson, 'On the Prevalence of Rape in the United States', *Signs*, 6, no. 1 (1980), pp. 136-46; on the welfare state see, e.g., E. Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State* (Tavistock, London, 1977).
36. K. Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Hart-Davis, London, 1971), pp. 25, 26.
37. N. McWilliams, 'Contemporary Feminism, Consciousness Raising and Changing Views of the Political' in J. Jaquette (ed.), *Women in Politics* (Wiley, New York, 1974), p. 161.
38. *Ibid.*
39. L.B. Iglitzin, 'The Making of the Apolitical Woman: Femininity and Sex-Stereotyping in Girls' in Jaquette, *Women in Politics*, p. 34.
40. J. Habermas, 'The Public Sphere', and Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, pp. 9, 2.
41. R.P. Wolff, 'There's Nobody Here but Us Persons' in C. Gould and M. Wartofsky (eds.), *Women and Philosophy* (Putnam's, New York, 1976), pp. 137, 142-43. Wolff also objects to the feminist struggle against the separation of private and public because it builds normative assumptions about human nature into the advocacy of new forms of social institutions — an oddly misplaced objection in the light of the assumption about women's and men's nature embodied in patriarchal-liberalism.
42. See R.P. Petchesky, 'Reproductive Freedom: Beyond "A Woman's Right to Choose"', *Signs*, 5, no. 4 (1980), pp. 661-85.
43. I have taken the phrase from R.M. Unger, *Knowledge and Politics* (Free Press, New York, 1975). Unger's claim to have provided a total critique of liberalism must also be rejected. He fails to see that the antinomies of theory and fact, reason and desire, and rules and values are, at the same time, expressions of the patriarchal antinomy between man and woman. He states (p. 59) that 'the political form of the opposition of formal reason to arbitrary desire is the contrast between public and private existence' — but it is also the opposition between the 'nature' of men and women.