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## THEORISING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

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**Abstract:** *The 19th century saw an expression of women’s ardent desire for freedom, emancipation and assertion in the public space. Women hardly managed to assert themselves at all in the public sphere, as any deviation from their traditional role was seen as unnatural. The human soul knows no gender distinctions, so we can say that women face the same desire for fulfillment as men do. Today, women are more and more encouraged to develop their skills by undertaking activities within the public space that are different from those that form part of traditional domestic chores. The woman of the 19th century felt the need to be useful to society, to make her contribution visible in a variety of domains. A woman does not have to become masculine to get power. If she is successful in any important job, this does not mean that she thinks like a man, but that she thinks like a woman. Women have broken through the walls that cut them off from public life, activity and ambition. There are no hindrances that can prevent women from taking their place in society.*

**Keywords:** *difference, family, private space, public space, work.*

## **1. Introduction**

The separation between home and work makes substantial differences to the daily life of both women and men. This means that there is a clear distinction between public and private life. In my study I will focus on the outstanding role that the issue of work has. Women's need to feel of use in the outer space is to be shown. They are not placed on the same scale as men, but they act for the same purpose. The activities are presented to be differently enterprised, but the place and the aim they have is almost the same.

In recent years, difference has become a key concept in political, social and cultural theory. There are many reasons for this. They range from the changing composition of Western societies to the impact of new social movements on society.

Since the late 1960s, second-wave feminism has led the way in putting a wide range of previously marginalised issues on the political agenda. Beginning as loose networks of consciousness-raising and campaigning groups, the women's movement attempted to develop new forms of political organisation which aspired to non-hierarchical structures and aimed to empower all women whatever their background. It initiated a wide range of political campaigns directed at issues as diverse as equal pay, status etc. As the movement developed, it encouraged women to take an active part as women in other struggles, ranging from campaigns in Northern Ireland to women's support groups in the miners' strike of 1985. Like other social movements, feminism has given rise to new forms of social and cultural theory. (Dască 2001; 2008).

## **2. The problem of difference**

Differences between individuals and groups, between sexes, classes, races, religions and nations, become important political issues when they involve relations of power.

Power takes many forms, affecting access to material resources as well as questions of language, culture, and the right to define who one is. Power relations of class, sexism, heterosexism, and racism have ensured that it has been largely white, Western, middle- and upper-class men who have defined meaning, controlled economics and determined the nature of relations between East and West and North and South. In the process, women, all people of colour and non-Western nations have been defined as different and implicitly or explicitly inferior. Differences can be categorised in various ways – social, political, cultural. How differences are defined has implications for whether they are seen as desirable, changeable or fixed. Ideas of difference which are grounded in a mixture of biology and 19<sup>th</sup> century middle-class views of femininity have not disappeared from contemporary Western culture.

Man is the provider in a hostile world, who fights to preserve our values and way of life. The woman is the vulnerable sexual partner or passive nurturer. Gender difference, a control issue in popular culture and the practices of everyday life, is also a key dimension of social and cultural theory, the law, religion, psychology and the life sciences. The assumption that women are naturally different from men is fundamental for the history of Western civilisations. From biblical accounts of the creation to modern science, stress has been laid on women's intrinsic difference from men. Theories of gender differences have most often been written from perspectives that assume the white male to be the norm against which all

others should be measured and which see all women as deviating from this norm in ways that fit them for domesticity and motherhood. Their supposed natural attributes both contrast with and complement those of men.

Biological theories of difference tend to focus on women's and men's different reproductive roles. Motherhood as the essence of woman's being was central to 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific accounts of gender. Scientific theories of difference were used to justify women's exclusion from higher education and public life. Both white women and both women and men of colour were said to possess smaller brains than white men, a factor taken to indicate their lesser powers of reasoning. At the beginning of the new millennium, and in the wake of two significant waves of feminist activism, such ideas seemed both extreme and outdated.

Difference as lack and inferiority has remained a key aspect of many influential 20<sup>th</sup> century theories of sexual difference. In Freudian psychoanalysis we find a theory which takes the male as the norm and defines women as different and inferior to this norm. Sex role psychology has long categorised certain qualities as masculine and other as feminine. In such studies the feminine role tends to be identified with a long list of predictable characteristics including lack of independence, passivity, illogicality, indecisiveness, and lack of confidence which continue to surface in popular representations of gender difference (Weedon 1999:1-10).

Throughout its history, feminism has taken issue with the hegemonic meanings ascribed to women's biological and anatomical differences from men. The meanings given to femaleness and femininity assumed political importance for women because they were used to determine and limit the social and economic spheres to which women had access. In Britain in the

1790s Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women were different from men as a result of an inadequate education, which privileged sensibility over reason. Education was a theme to which feminists would return again and again over the next two centuries. Indeed the debate over girls' and women's education has remained a key aspect of feminist politics to the present day.

Germaine Greer argued has argued that women possessed special mothering qualities which should be extended to the rest of society. Many feminists contended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that to accept the assumption that women and men are intrinsically different should not necessarily imply that women are inferior. Their platform was a familiar one, suggesting that women and men are equal but different. This type of argumentation was rejected by most Anglo-American feminists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who campaigned for suffrage and access to education and to the professions on the basis of women's similarity to men. The right to be different without being seen as inferior is still a key theme of present-day feminist thought (Greer 1999; 1993).

The problem of conceiving difference in ways which are not restrictive but liberating remains a key theoretical and political question for contemporary feminism. Women who choose motherhood and domesticity over a career and public life countered second-wave rejections of women's traditional roles in the patriarchal nuclear family. The issues of women's dual role as both domestic and paid worker, and of motherhood and family responsibilities, pointed to the need to move beyond the binaries. The need to respect differences and choices and to re-evaluate traditional hierarchies of what counts as important remains an important feminist issue (Buikema 1995; Friedan 1992).

Liberal feminism in the West today has achieved the extension of most civil rights and duties to women. However, the liberal strategies of arguing from the perspective of abstract individuals and playing down the differences which result from women's role as childbearers led to the burdens involved in women's dual role and what became known in the 1980s as the ideology of the "superwoman". A Superwoman was expected to participate fully in all spheres, the domestic, the workplace and public life, while raising a family, without any fundamental structural changes to society. Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe under socialism, women found themselves expected to manage family life, paid work and public life without any fundamental changes in the structure of work or the sexual division of labour (Weedon 1999:14).

Women are tired of having less influence on decision-making at home, at work, in offices and even in Parliament. They want to be everywhere, in every office where decisions are taken that affect their lives. Women still live and work in unequal conditions, but their lives are nevertheless better than women's lives have ever been before (Walter 1998; West 1991).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century America women were not encouraged to have jobs. They were encouraged to always look young, to be preoccupied with their appearance, so stress was laid on their beauty rather than on their intellectual abilities. In recent decades women have struggled for their right to decide for themselves in all respects. Even in matters of fashion they rebelled so furiously at times against male-imposed norms that it was sometimes argued that women's liberation had denied women the right to feminine dressing. (Faludi 1992; Sawicki 1991).

### **3. Socialism – As an Alternative to Liberalism**

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s, the main alternative to liberalism in the West was socialism. Until the advent of second-wave feminism, the British labour movement saw gender politics either as a non-issue or as a harmful deviation from the class struggle.

Moreover, not only industrial relations and politics but also education was long seen as a male preserve. The tendency to restrict women to a domestic support role was reinforced by the idea of family wage. One important side effect of this was the tendency to see women as secondary wage earners and to pay them less.

It was believed that if women were given the same freedom of occupation as men, this would lead to too many people competing for the same number of positions in all kinds of areas of work and thus to a shortage of jobs. As long as competition is the general law of human life, it is unfair to exclude half the competitors. It is neither just nor right that one half of the human race should pass through life in a state of forced subordination to the other (Mill 1993:134).

The effects of Marxist theories of women's liberation can be seen in Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989, where socialism was officially regarded as having solved the "woman question". Clearly the situation varied widely between the different socialist states. In Poland fundamental changes in women's traditional social role and in gender norms were hindered by the continuing influence of the Catholic Church. In secular states such as the German Democratic Republic, however, which suffered from a shortage of labour and a low birth rate, considerable efforts were made to bring women into the workforce and to enable them to combine full-time paid work with motherhood and childcare. This included extensive

maternity leave and childcare facilities, positive discrimination in work and education for women with children, a day's paid leave each month for household tasks and government promotion of the image of the working mother. Yet even after forty years of socialism in the German Democratic Republic, there was little evidence of any fundamental change in the sexual division of labour either at work or in the home.

In the West, second-wave feminism saw the birth of new forms of socialist feminism which challenged the public and placed issues of domesticity, reproduction and sexuality on the political agenda. This approach involved the privileging of patriarchal opposition over all other types of oppression, a move which earlier socialist feminists did not support. The main feature of second wave socialist feminism from the early 1970s onwards was the desire to hold together class and gender as social factors, which constitute difference in oppressive ways. Gradually, in response to criticism from women of colour, race and sexuality were added to class and gender.

Second-wave socialist feminism has its roots in Marxism. Socialist feminists have always insisted on the importance of class, but failed initially to take account of questions of race, colonialism and sexual orientation. Class continues to matter to feminism to the degree that the movement seeks fundamental changes in the position of all women. As socialist feminists have long argued, this implies fundamental changes in the social order as a whole. Nevertheless, this change necessarily has implications for the privileges enjoyed by middle- and upper-class women (Weedon 1999; Hutson 1999).



#### **4. Women's Work**

Women have always done most of the work for human survival. The heaviness of certain tasks has been no reason for women's not doing them. Women were not admitted to jobs that required brain power or management skills. Time spent with children is not classified as work, although the mother does not use it pointlessly, but rather to teach her child to speak, to help it advance in social skills, to answer its questions, to deal with its concerns, to prepare it for school activities.

Any working woman who bears a child knows that any leisure time she might have had will not exist for several years. All studies show that leisure is a masculine privilege. Men regard weekends as time off, when they play sport in a more or less serious way, or watch it as they please. Working women use weekends to catch up with the tasks left over from an exhausting week. They are grateful if their partner takes the child/ren out with him, so they can get on with their work, but if he does, it is not for long.

According to Emma Goldman in *Public Women, Public Words*, emancipation has brought the woman economic equality with man, which means that she can choose her own profession and line of work. On account of the fact that her past and present physical training has not equipped her with the necessary strength to compete with man, she ends up compelled to exhaust all her energy, use up her vitality and strain every nerve in order to reach the market level.

Very few have ever succeeded, for it is a fact that women teachers, doctors, lawyers, architects and engineers are neither treated with the same confidence as their male colleagues, nor given equal remuneration (1997:13).

Goldman focuses on the idea that those women who attain such equality generally do so at the expense of their physical and psychological well-being. Still, the position of the 'working girl' is far more natural than that of her seemingly fortunate sister in the more cultured professional walks of life; that is teachers, physicians, lawyers, etc., who have to make an appropriate contribution in terms of time, which means that their private life may be neglected. The author considers that the narrowness of the existing conception of woman's independence and emancipation, the love for a man who is not her equal, socially speaking, the fear that love would rob her of freedom and independence, the horror that the love or joy of motherhood would only hinder her in the full exercise of her profession, render the emancipated woman a 'compulsory vestal'. The tragedy of the self-supporting or economically free woman does not lie in too many, but in too few experiences. True, she surpasses her sister of past generations in knowledge of the world and human nature; it is precisely because of this that she feels deeply the lack of life's essence, which alone can enrich the human soul, and without which the majority of women have become mere professional automatons (Knight and Golden 1997:14).

S. L. Myres states in her *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915* that women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century America keenly felt their disadvantage in not having a legal voice in the decisions which affected the institutions in which they invested so much time and energy:

If women could help establish schools and teach in them, why should they not have a voice in selecting school board members; if they could help to establish communities and work for municipal improvements, why should they not be allowed to vote in municipal and county elections? (1982: 213).

Barna asserts in *The Frog in the Kettle: What Christians Need to Know about Life in the Year 2000* that the ideals of women in the '50s and '60s revolved around motherhood and home. Twenty years later, the dream focused increasingly upon being accepted as an equal in the labour force and having fewer family-related constraints. Nowadays, women consider that it is their right to be a mother and a career woman at the same time, as well as to have a marriage relationship that is void of conflict and tension. The author states:

The increasing prevalence of divorce and working women has turned child care into a major growth industry. Here again we can see a shift in people's priorities; the dominant goal in life for most mothers was to raise healthy, happy, well-adjusted children. Today the goal of most parents is to be personally fulfilled in all walks of life. (1990:69).

Due to the fact that both women and men want to have their well-established place in the world of work, the family unit itself is behaving quite differently today from in the past. Women are ever more successful and the new feminism celebrates their success; women are presidents, ambassadors (for example, the first female ambassador to Ireland, Veronica Sutherland, the first female president of Ireland, Mary Robinson). Compared to any other age, women now have more power in culture, media, politics than ever before. The greatest achievement of women's movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to get women out of their homes into important public places where their voices could be heard. Women have always worked, but it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century women's movement that work could lift them out of poverty; until then their work could not offer them a decent living.

According to Lyde C. Seizer in *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War 1850-1872*, dramatic changes occurred in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the structure and scale of American business and finance and in the organisation of work in factories, offices, retail stores, and many other workplaces.

In those fifty years the corporation became the dominant form of business, while all manner of work underwent subdivision, routinisation, and mechanisation. Organisational and technological changes of this kind frequently permitted the dilution of skills formerly needed to perform standard work processes, and women often gained employment in such redefined jobs. As a part of this business revolution, white-collar work assumed increasing importance in the economy and women came to compose a major segment of this new working class. Business initiated new pay schemes and introduced innovative welfare measures to help stabilise the work force and encourage employees to increase their efficiency and maximise productivity.

The labour shortage during the Civil War opened up to women a host of new job opportunities at higher wages than women had been earning before the war. This unusual situation set in motion a whirl of job changes and raised expectations among women. When hopes were not realised and women failed to receive what they considered their just due, widespread militancy emerged among women workers. Wartime production pressures also prompted the introduction of women into non-traditional jobs that in turn brought these women into conflict with male co-workers. The altered gender composition of the work force in factories, offices, and elsewhere was viewed differently by male and female wage earners. Union men in particular looked at women's introduction into their fields of employment as

a threat to their customary work practices, working conditions, and wages, while women perceived the new jobs as a distinct advance in their occupational status and earnings. In fact, wartime work changes affected these two groups so contrarily that intraclass tensions along gender lines began to flare at home while the military conflict raged abroad.

## **5. Conclusion**

Job evaluation is a subtle business, because work has no intrinsic value. The vast majority of female workers in modern times have no job security, few privileges and little or no insurance.

Women are not paid in accordance with the work they do. They have been conditioned to believe that men's work is harder and more stressful than theirs. Most women do not allow themselves any spare time. Though equal pay legislation has been in operation in all the developed countries for many years, women continue to earn less than men because the kinds of work that women do are considered to be of less value. Women are not only paid less, they are also disadvantaged in terms of pensions, sickness, benefits, and opportunities.

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