



Review of Deborah Orr, Dianna Taylor, Eileen Kahl, Kathleen Earle, Christa Rainwater and Linda Lopez McAlister (Eds), *Feminist Politics: Identity, Difference and Agency* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), xi + 274 pp.

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In 1998, the International Association of Women Philosophers (IAPh), founded in the 1970s “to give German-speaking philosophers and later women philosophers from other countries and culture, a place to share their work and ideas on philosophical topics” (p. vii), organized its eighth symposium in Boston, USA, with the original theme: political divisions and identity politics. Deborah Orr et al. edited the volume *Feminist Politics*, based on updated versions of the presentations at the symposium, representing another important leap towards the fulfillment of the objectives of the IAPh. It is above all an exceptionally brilliant philosophical interpretation of feminist politics in the contexts of subordination and domination, and is an effort geared towards redressing it from an international perspective.

The book contains fourteen chapters evenly organized into two main parts. The first, “Reconceptualizing Challenges to Entrenched Political Divides” opens with Deborah Orr’s panoramic introductory chapter, which basically sets the main problematic of the study and provides a terrific recapitulation of the contributions of chapters. In the first substantive chapter, Deborah Orr offers a critique of the mind/body paradigm in feminist theory, especially rationalism, anti-rationalism and post-rationalism. She draws on the influential works of Wittgenstein, Harowitz and Nagarjuna to argue persuasively about the shortcomings of each of these theories in explaining identity and difference. She also calls for “a de-essentialized” woman that avoids the mind/body binarism and associated dissonance with feminist theories (p. 34). Drawing on the works of Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles and Karen Barad, Jutta Weber explores the theoretical strengths and weaknesses of “denaturalization” in contemporary feminist thought. Reflection on what she calls “confusion of borders” between culture and nature, she usefully argues for the reinvention of nature such that feminists will no longer be afraid of nature as has been the case in the last decades.

Marie-Claire Belleau, Sigal Ben-Porath, Cathryn Bailey and Marlene Benjamin reflect on different aspects of feminism and identity. Belleau’s examines the nexus between feminism and identity politics in Quebec-Canada. Relying on the concept of “strategic intersectionality,” she makes a case against both essentialism and universalism, calling for a feminist approach that allows for unity in diversity through coalition building for mutual relations between contending feminist identities. Ben-Porath focuses on the links between militarism and patriarchy. For her, a “security state” produces “belligerent citizenship” (limited citizenship; p. 64), showing how this negatively affects women to make interesting arguments for reinvigorating the educational system in strengthening democracy. This not only

serves to “diversify the public sphere,” but also offers “further options, further visions, and further voices beyond the oppressive unity of belligerent citizenship” (p. 78). Contrary to the relative indifference of older feminists to the representation of “third wave” feminist activism, discarding it as “just a TV show” (p. 95), Bailey’s offers a useful argument that third wave activism does exist, albeit in a cultural and not in a traditionally political version. Yet the cultural representation of activism represents some form of politics by other means: “that young feminists have focused so much on cultural images need not be seen as representing a retreat from reality as much as how the reality is mediated through such images” (p. 83). Benjamin’s explores the relationship between catastrophic illness and the workings of the body on the one hand, and language and experience vis-à-vis connections and confusions, on the other. Drawing from her personal experiences, she argues about the gross inadequacy of analytic philosophy to effectively capture reality: “So far, analytic philosophy on its own somehow misses me on the table, misses the truth of my experience. The cold language of analytic philosophy often tramples on, rather than elicits, nuances moral response” (p. 110).

The second part, “Putting Identity Back into Politics,” begins with Morwenna Griffith. Deploying the methodology of “critical autobiography,” and the theory of feminist ontologies of the self, she identifies authenticity as “a serious business” that has to do with being “true to oneself in how one conducts oneself” (p. 119), underscoring the importance of playfulness—especially naughty playfulness—in coming to terms with feminist authenticity at a personal level. Alison Bailey engages the problematic of how to describe and understand the location of those who belong to dominant groups, yet resists the usual assumptions and orientations of those groups to offer a critical reappraisal of traitorous identity, with focus on privilege-cognizant white character. Bailey rearticulates existing insights in a way that avoids “the confusion often associated with the margin-center cartography of feminist stand-point theory” (p. 155), suggesting a focus on traitorous performances rather than on traitorous identities and locations. Birge Krondorfer assesses the nexus between feminist political theory and experience, reaching the conclusion that there is currently a disconnect between theory and practice: “women have not found or invented their bodies yet. It seems as if the temptation to become absorbed into the male-dominated symbolic order of the social fabric is as strong as rendering subjectivity” (p. 161).

Marjorie Miller inquires into the nexus between empowerment, place, movement and identity, the objectives of which were to distinguish between a feminist goal of empowerment and power; and to offer a conception of identity that disentangles it from the static and fixed dimensionality of place (p. 173). After a clarification of the concepts, Miller underscores “the circularity of identity and interest, the inseparability of the being and acting that are reciprocally constituting” (p. 182). Critically re-reading Spelman, Aristotle and Jewish law, Marla Brettscneider sees identities as not only multiple and intersecting, but also mutually constitutive, arguing for self-consciousness in the analysis of the power dynamics in the countertext to avoid a situation where the method of the countertext itself becomes imperialist. Smy Baehr interrogates the question of whether it is possible or not to do feminist political theory without theories of gender in plural settings. Drawing from the works of Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, which she considers incompatible

(possibly because of their reliance on different gender theories), Baehr submits that feminist political theories can better be developed in the absence of theories of gender: “feminist political theories depending for their validity on the truth of a particular theory of gender pose a problem in the context of feminist pluralism” (p. 232). This is not to foreclose any possible linkages between the two: “Surely feminists should not stop doing gender theory! . . . An account of feminist politics might be more viable if it can be presented without grounding in a particular theory of gender” (p. 234). In the last chapter, Dianna Taylor critically appraises the significance of the works of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault for contemporary feminist politics, identifying two important areas of relevance. First, both were pragmatic thinkers deeply interested in negotiating problems pertaining to thinking and acting in the world in a manner that promotes freedom and resist domination. Second, both asserted the idea of politics without blueprints. These represent the core concerns of philosophical feminist politics.

Overall, the book offers critical but refreshing insights into complex philosophical questions about identity and feminist politics, with many exemplary contributions. Although the length of essays vary widely, each offers theoretically and practically grounded analyses of the issues they engaged in a way that enriches our understanding of contemporary feminist politics from philosophical perspectives. However, one may wonder why it took so long (nearly a decade) for the book to get published. Given the overlap of contributions, one may also query the criteria used for grouping chapters into the two broad parts of the book. Interestingly, the lead editor already did justice to these concerns in the preface/introduction to the book. Nevertheless, the tendency of the book to reinforce the intellectual dimension of what it sets to counter politically and culturally—marginalization/exclusion/domination—remains a noticeable limitation of the book. How do we account for the complete exclusion of African feminists in an ambitious project of this nature, which seeks to be international in outlook? It is hoped that subsequent symposia and publications by the IAPh will truly be international. This shortcoming notwithstanding, there are many interesting things about *Feminist Politics*, including its theoretical and practical insights into crucial philosophical questions underlying feminist politics, clarity of expression and multidisciplinary outlook. The lead editor did a fabulous job providing a panoramic overview of each chapter in the introduction. These and related virtues make the book an outstanding scholarly work on identity and feminist politics in comparative perspective.

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