

Theories of Democracy

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**Feminist critiques pose no really significant threat to
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by

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Feminist critiques pose no really significant threat to liberal democracy.

When the first democratic state systems evolved in ancient Greece women were not regarded as part of the politically active *demos*. It took nearly 2,500 years for their role in the political sphere to significantly improve. Only at the beginning of the 20th century did women in general succeed in attaining the right to formally participate, though in some parts of Switzerland women only received the right to vote in the 1980s. While there had been powerful women before, they only managed to do this in non-democratic, hereditary roles for example as queens, and then only if there were no other direct male heirs.

The French revolution in the 18th century brought about the first feminist movements in the modern sense. Olympe de Gouges said at the Paris Commune in 1793 that “if a woman has the right to ascend the scaffold, she must also have the right to ascend the rostrum” (Wasmuth, p 96). Thereafter Elisabeth Cady Stanton, among others, called for women’s rights during the anti-slavery movements of the 19th century in the United States, when they recognised a similar oppression of women to that of the slaves.

Though different feminist groups saw, and still see, big differences in the causes of inequality and their aims, they all recognised the fundamental fact that they were being oppressed (ibid, p 96ff).

Liberal democracy developed at a similar time in history. However, while women’s rights still remain an issue in the western world, liberal democracy

already is the accepted status quo. It combines democratic values of public participation and equality with the liberalist idea of the individual. This latter notion is often described in the literature through the distinction of the public and private spheres. In addition it is the established opinion that in a liberal democracy the public's participation is in general limited to the choice of representatives in order to provide for the greatest efficiency of the system. (Beetham, p 55ff)

Early Feminism versus Liberal Democracy

The liberal separation of the public and the private realms has been one of the central targets of feminists (ibid, p 66ff). In addition the long tradition to exclude women from the right to vote, being "the merest tip of the iceberg", had made liberal democracy one of the main targets of criticism from feminists (Phillips, p 93).

The above public sphere has in general tended to exclude the family, regarding it as a private issue. However, feminists argue that due to the general hierarchical structure of the family where the man is usually the head and the woman holds an inferior position there is a fundamental unequal structure in place. This inequality is seen as contradictory to the basic principles of a democracy. The slogan "the public is private" is commonly used to describe this dilemma. Prior to the split between public and private realms when liberal ideas first emerged in the middle of the last millennium the status of men and women was simply part of their natural relationship.

Coole argues that at that stage a radical resolution of the different treatment of the sexes could have occurred. However, while men gradually became equal – at least those with money at the beginning – women continued in their subservient role, as their role was secluded to the “private” part of society. It is the assumption that there is a natural distinction between male and female that causes some of the biggest problems as women are commonly designated as the irrational counterpart to the rational man and can or, some might say, should therefore not be allowed to partake (Coole, p 2ff). As a result “for feminists, democracy has never existed”, as liberal society is regarded “as a series of male clubs” (Pateman, p 210).

Adapting Liberal Democracy to Feminist Needs

In this situation it is now necessary to look at what could be and has been done to accommodate this prevention of women’s participation in politics. The first aim, women’s fundamental right to participate was won at the beginning of the 20th century. With the victory of the suffragettes movement and the end of the First World War came their right to vote. However, there still remain important barriers to women’s active participation besides the ticking of the box at an election. Though constitutionally they are supposed to be equals, the cultural, social and economic preconditions still pose serious obstacles for true equality.

Many male writers, and also some female ones, have said that a woman’s natural position in the private sphere of society is for her benefit, she can stay

uncorrupted and pure, while men in their pursuit of fame are competitive and “susceptible to fads and fashions” (Smith, in: Elshtain, p 615 n 22). It is criticized that, women are seen as not being able to be both a “good” private person and a “good” public person (Elshtain, p 608). Men were supposedly needed to perform the public duties as soldiers, workers and politicians, while women were to devote their lives for the good of society by bearing and rearing children (Phillips, p 97). Emancipated women are therefore those who are closest to being like men, giving up on their female identity, which is seen as an inferior category (Coole, p 3).

To accommodate both femininity and an acceptance of women’s role in the public realm “radical change in the social, economic and political order” is needed (Delmar, in: Wilford, p 252). As a result, feminists are often viewed as critical of liberal democracy *per se* and as wanting a complete new system to be set up in its place, as the historical foundations on which the current one is based are essentially patriarchal and would not support further women’s rights beyond those already granted in the suffrage.

With development of women’s affairs ministers and affirmative action, some of these problems were attempted to be redressed. Similarly to the welfare state and its socialist egalitarian aims, feminist equality was the target of many western governments. For instance, with the development of legal provisions for maternity leave a step was made to combine both a woman’s public “male” role and her private “female” one. However, serious issues still arise from the large pay differentials in the public world and the jobs which women can in

general find, usually worth less than those a male with a similar qualification can get. As a result, it is often hard for women to confidently claim a position in the public due to the fact that a trade-off has to be made between the benefits of staying at home in the traditional role of the house-wife or getting a job which pays her less than her male counterpart. In Austria for example, this is tried to be remedied by granting full maternity leave of three years only when the father takes at least one third of it. It is the aim of liberal democratic governments, which are dominated by men, to accommodate as many feminist needs as they deem necessary in order to pre-empt any calls for an actual restructuring of the system as such.

Modern Feminism versus Liberal Democracy

With the development of women's movements in the 1960s new aims for feminism came about. Feminists agreed that though they had been granted the right to vote some 50 years previously their situation had not changed to the extent some had been hoping for. As mentioned above, Pateman says that "women have never been and still are not admitted as full and equal members and citizens in any country known as a 'democracy'" (Pateman, p 210). Robert Dahl's view that due to women's inclusion in the voting populace they are now full members of the demos (Dahl, p 115f), is criticized by Mendus as optimistic as it does not touch upon the social and economic inequalities. She further condemns his implication that any existing inequalities are easily remediable. In addition, she mentions feminists' opinion

“that, in the case of women, the problems have a theoretical origin which goes beyond mere social and economic inequalities” (Mendus, p 210).

But how should the problems caused by these theoretical origins be resolved? On the one hand there are the conservative or liberal feminists who believe that women’s position in society should be improved without changing the entire *status quo*. The socialist and Marxist feminists would argue that this *status quo* and the capitalist patriarchal system it entails is the cause of all the problems and therefore only a complete restructuring of power relationships could offer a solution. The third group in the 60s was that of the radical feminists who saw the problem based on the distinction between the private and the public and the ensuing inferiority of a woman’s role. They believe that though a distinction needs to be made between the two sexes, the female role should not be discriminated against and that society should regard women’s experiences and their role as at least as important as the male culture which is based on notions of power and individualism (Wasmuht, p 98).

Conclusion

I would like to argue that though male liberal thinkers generally tended to exclude the issue it is not as such that liberalism is the problem but rather the patriarchal hierarchical structures that exist within the original culture. Though there is scope enough for the structures to be changed within I believe that liberal democracy in itself is not the cause for inequalities between the sexes. At the same time, one has to acknowledge feminists call for a complete restructuring of the society in order to recognize still remaining inequalities. But as historic developments have shown democracy is general and liberal democracy in particular are constantly changing and adapting to old and new problems. With the increased public participation of women based on legal foundations one can expect to see more changes being made to include women's demands. While there definitely is a problem with the patriarchal structure of society, men's rights and the consequent demand to keep their power has gradually declined. While a century ago men believed in the natural division of labour between the sexes, most men, however grudgingly, now accept women's rights to enter the public sphere. Liberal democracy has developed from its early beginnings in the 18th century to progressively include greater parts of society. Sexual, capitalist and racist oppression does still exist, but its legitimacy is slowly eroding. Whether liberal democracy really is the best form to provide for public participation is up for discussion, but currently there is still no more efficient means. If feminist demands can be accommodated in this system it appears that this would be in the best interest. Liberal democracy will continue to develop in the future, whether it will ever be

replaced by a different system is possible, but probably not in the foreseeable future. Men will need to accept it as a fact that they are not the sole rulers and have to make room for women to express their individual needs. It is also important to realise that women, just like men, are individuals who both want to be regarded as equal to and different from others. It is this individualistic concept of the free will of man – or woman – that forms part of the basic principles of liberalism and liberal democracy, and could be regarded as one of the fundamental aims of feminism as well as society as a whole.

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