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From Fragmentation to a New Wave: Identity and Citizenship in  
Feminist Theory

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will argue that feminism is at the edge of a new wave brought about by the fragmentation of the feminist political movement and the rise of postmodern theory. It contends that postmodern theories have been used by feminists as a 'critical strategy' to understand why the movement fragmented and to move towards the acceptance of more strategic and conventional politics. Thus many feminists are now prepared to leave behind the utopian and separatist legacies of the second wave. These feminists are willing to consider how a future feminist movement can be built that will account for the differences between women, and realise that there will thus need to be a painful and precarious process of alliance-building. It is argued that given the precarious nature of the alliance, feminists in a new wave must also re-conceive democratic models of citizenship to ensure that women and feminists' concerns are met in the wider political sphere. This second concern also makes sure that they have institutional and procedural support should fragmentation recur.

The thesis considers three such models of citizenship: Seyla Benhabib's deliberative model, Iris Young's communicative model and Chantal Mouffe's agonal one. It contends that these models only partly address the concerns of new wave feminism, because they are based on transformative and participatory models of politics. These models undermine the importance of feminists finding legitimate political relationships that respect the multiplicity of their demands as feminists, as women and as citizens. This thesis concludes that representative models of democracy are more suited to feminist concerns in a new wave. Such models have distinctive characteristics that allow women to be politically included in terms of a range of political concerns and identities. Representative models of democracy, moreover, make it clear that the political relationship is one of formal authorisation and not one of personal identity recognition and transformation.

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## **Introduction: A New Wave of Feminism?**

Twenty years ago the second wave feminist movement in the West was in decline. It had fragmented into factions, despite attempts to build a sisterhood, and many women had left the movement, feeling disillusioned and frustrated. More worrying is that its radical elements refused to engage with mainstream politics, choosing instead to fight for separatist, women-only utopias that would embody their views of authentic feminist living.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this thesis is to draw together the developments that have occurred in feminist political theory in the past twenty years. It seeks to understand both why the second wave movement fragmented and how feminists have responded to its demise. Indeed, it suggests that feminism is on the precipice of a new wave of theory and practice in which the political dreams of second wave feminism have become more diffuse and less certain: gone are the separatist political visions, the search for a universalistic sisterhood and the idea that feminism can only be defined in terms of one theory of oppression or patriarchy. In their place, many feminists are developing more inclusive political models of democratic citizenship, the idea of the movement as an alliance, and an understanding of how different women suffer from different forms of oppression.<sup>2</sup>

To understand how feminism has moved towards this new wave, it is crucial to examine the role of postmodern theories. It is true that few feminists would view themselves as 'postmodern-feminists,' yet certain postmodern themes have been vital in understanding feminist fragmentation and in rethinking its central political concepts. What will be defended here is the idea of postmodernism as a critical strategy that is particularly useful for evaluating radical movement politics: arising, as it did, out of the ashes of the 1960s' liberation movements. Seen as a critical strategy, postmodernism looks for the limits of radical activist politics, rather than seeking to

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<sup>1</sup> Two useful studies of the politics of the second wave movement are B. Ryan's, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), and D. Bouchier's, *The Feminist Challenge: The Women's Movement for Liberation in Britain and the USA*, (London: Macmillan, 1983).



reject the entire emancipatory tradition. Hence, postmodernism, as a critical strategy, questions the tradition's emphasis on the possibility of finding a universal, revolutionary subject, an overarching theory of oppression, and a utopian political settlement free from relations of inequality and power. Instead, it stresses the anti-essential basis of subjectivity, the contingency of all political thought, and the impossibility of utopia.

When this strategy is applied to the feminist movement, it exposes three problems in the way that the second wave movement operated. Firstly, it challenges the idea that an 'authentic feminist' subject can be theorised, arguing that such a project always essentialises women. Secondly, it considers the contingent nature of feminist political thought on existing political practices and questions the second wave feminist rejection of these as inherently anti-feminist and anti-women. Thirdly, it questions the viability of feminist separatism, believing that feminists, by searching out these types of political settlements, deny politics and power relations. While some feminists may fear these changes<sup>3</sup>, arguing that a feminism without these elements cannot have a political project, it will be contended that such ideas actually provide the conditions for a rejuvenation of feminist politics as a more realistic and attractive enterprise than it was perceived to be at the end of the second wave.

In this rejuvenated politics women will be able to find political inclusion and make political demands in terms of a range of identities and in a number of political spaces. They can be feminists, citizens, mothers and businesswomen, without risking their feminist identity or being accused of 'false consciousness'. Thus, postmodernism sets up a twofold strategy for feminists. First, feminists must be realistic about the structure of any future feminist politics. They must not hope for a united, solidaristic sisterhood, but must instead look at how different feminist groups,

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<sup>2</sup> Valerie Bryson's latest book, *Feminist Debates: Issues of Theory and Political Practice*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), gives an illuminating portrayal of the recent trends in feminist political thought.

<sup>3</sup> Two critiques of the postmodern project are to be found in N. Hartsock, 'Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist theory,' *Cultural Critique*, No. 14, (Winter 1989-1990), and S. Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism,' *New Left Review*, No. 178, (November/December 1989).



with different interpretations of feminist political demands, might come together for political action. The purpose of such an alliance structure is to allow for this common action without essentialising women. However, given its loose bonds, the alliance is expected to be precarious, often dissolving into its constituent parts and needing constant negotiation to rebuild it. The second strand of new wave feminist strategy, therefore, is to acknowledge both the precariousness of feminist movement politics and the anti-essential identity of women. The latter means that women will always be more than feminists, and will often want political inclusion in terms of other aspects of their identities, other political interests, other political claims. Hence, feminists in a new wave must work to find models of democratic citizenship that can allow women multiple levels of representation and participation. In short, they are looking for models that can respond to the plurality of women's demands as both feminists and citizens.

To this end, the second part of the thesis will consider three feminist models of democratic citizenship, examining how successfully they incorporate women as feminists and as citizens: Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy, Iris Young's model of communicative democracy and Chantal Mouffe's rather embryonic model of agonal democracy.<sup>4</sup> These thinkers are all dealing with the question of how to make democratic models accessible to feminism, which has itself been transformed by the experiences of fragmentation and the influence of postmodern theories. They consider the demands of the citizenship process on feminist theories, addressing how democratic inclusion and participation can empower both feminists and women to become active citizens.

However, it will be argued that these models are not ideal for new wave feminism because they do not find the right balance between women's feminist and citizen identities. Benhabib and Mouffe's models will be shown to subsume women's feminist identity under their citizen identity, whereas Young privileges women's

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<sup>4</sup> The basic premises of their models are to be found in S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press and

feminist identity at the expense of their wider citizen one. Given these problems, the last chapter will conclude by positing representative democracy as a model that can respond to both the need for autonomous feminist organisations and alliances, and the need for women to be citizens in terms of a number of political identities, some of which may not be influenced by either feminist or gender identity.

### *A brief outline*

Feminists in a new wave need to re-engage with politics by conceiving a future feminist movement as an alliance, and by considering how women can find political inclusion as citizens. They need to be aware of the historic circumstances of their politics and, hence, Chapter One of the thesis considers the historical tradition of feminism: from its roots in Enlightenment thought and revolutionary practice, to the fragmentation and demise of the second wave feminist movement. If feminism is to be reconceived as a contingent and dynamic political project, it is sensible to consider its long tradition. Part of the reason for the fragmentation of the second wave feminist movement was that many feminists denied this history, presenting in its place a grand theoretical account of women's universal and eternal oppression that did not take account of women's past activism. This chapter wants to redress the balance and present the feminist tradition as a useful intellectual resource for future feminist accounts. On these terms, the specific incidence of the second wave fragmentation is best understood as part of a historical tradition, such that is both a powerful legacy and a series of lessons to be learned for feminists in a new wave.

In Chapter Two the postmodern problematic is introduced. It is defended as a critical strategy that is useful for understanding the historical tradition and fragmentation of feminism. As a critical strategy it is used to explain why feminism fragmented in the late 1970s and how its central ideas of feminist political collectivity and agency can be re-thought. At the same time, the critical strategy acknowledges feminist criticisms and fears of postmodernism, addressing how these are often

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Blackwell, 1992), I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University



informed by the powerful legacies of second wave movement politics. The chapter concludes with the suggestion that the best way to recognise the legacy of the second wave is to protect the diverse feminist voices that arose in this period and the strong call by many feminists not to be essentialised, not to be determined in terms of authentic notions of feminist identity. It is on this basis that feminists in a new wave need to consider how feminists can come together as an alliance - to protect this diversity - and how they should operate politically in inclusive, not separatist, political models. Such political models are important for those times when the alliance is fragmented and when women want to make other political demands. It is the recognition that women's political ambitions do not begin and end with feminism, they are also citizens with a wide range of democratic demands.

The thesis then moves onto the detailed examination of three models of democratic inclusion. Benhabib, Young and Mouffe have been chosen because they have all, to varying extents, addressed the postmodern concerns discussed in Chapter Two. They have accepted that women have a range of political concerns and have brought women back into the political fold, so to speak, by addressing how women could be included as citizens and how their demands as citizens can be heard by democratic models of citizenship that have often excluded women's and feminists' concerns.

In Chapter Three Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy is considered. She modifies the Habermasian vision of deliberative democracy and its base in discourse ethics to make it more open to the particularity of feminist demands. However, even this revised model has a number of difficulties which make it less than adequate for feminism in a new wave, where the movement is structured, at best, as an alliance and women are seen as diverse social actors. Put briefly, she continues to posit feminism as a unified political grouping whose primary political objective is that of achieving democratic inclusion. She does not consider the distinct nature of women's political demands as feminists. Thus, it is argued that her model is both

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Press, 1990) and C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, (London and New York: Verso, 1993).



undesirable and impracticable for feminists in a new wave, leaving feminists to sacrifice the specificity of their demands to the common interest of all citizens.

Chapter Four looks at Young's attempt to further modify deliberative democracy. In her attempt she avoids some of Benhabib's difficulties because she neither presupposes a unified feminist group nor presumes that inclusive democratic politics produces a common interest. Instead of presupposing a unified feminist group, she theorises the idea of an 'affinity group' that allows women to come together politically without needing to share an inherent essential identity. The 'affinity group' according to Young is fluid, dynamic and cognisant of the differences between women. She believes that women can be represented in a more inclusive democratic model, she calls 'communicative democracy,' in terms of this 'affinity group' identity. With this type of representation, they can make their specific political demands heard and still remain a heterogeneous collective. However, her concept of communicative democracy, is only useful for group representation if the affinity group is structured as a permanent, rigid and institutionalised forum for women, losing its fluidity and flexibility. To overcome these problems, she has recently theorised a concept of 'serial collectivity' which envisions any future feminist group as a short-term, possibly issue-based and narrowly representative political group. However, she has not altered her concept of democracy to respond to these changes.

Chantal Mouffe, in contrast to both Benhabib and Young, is more successful in understanding the difficulties of achieving a feminist collective after the fragmentation of second wave movement. She is also aware of the particular demands political processes make on all public actors and, thus, she does not believe that an cohesive political model is possible. Her response therefore has been to address how feminists can form political groups which do not essentialise women by connecting with other marginalised groups, and by stating their demands as part of a wider fight against subordination. She calls this vision 'radical democratic citizenship' and argues that it would be structured as a loose alliance. In such an alliance the groups could come together for political action but maintain their differences. In addition to this

concept of citizenship, she has recently begun to theorise a model of agonal democracy that further accounts for the difficulties in forming political collectives in diverse societies, where citizens may have a number of social and political allegiances. This is a promising move and the Chapter ends by speculatively reading Mouffe's concept of agonal democracy and agonal politics in terms of feminist politics. It shows that while the model of agonal democracy is promising and worthy of detailed analysis, it is still being developed in her work. Hence, she continues to privilege a citizen identity based on the radical democratic collective. On her argument, membership in such a collective radically transforms the pre-existing identities of those in it. Consequently, she too, like Benhabib, risks losing the specificity of the feminist movement to wider democratic demands.

Chapter Six begins by reiterating the three broad problems Benhabib, Young and Mouffe's models of democracy have in protecting women's identities as both feminists and citizens. These problems are as follows: firstly, their shared assumption that women, in the right political model, can be successfully unified as an active feminist political collective; secondly, their portrayal of democratic politics as transformative, changing conflicts of opinion and value-pluralism into collective concerns, and thirdly, their continued failure to recognise and accommodate the range of women's political concerns, with Benhabib and Mouffe undermining the specificity of feminist political demands and Young favouring a unified feminist identity at the expense of women's wider concerns as citizens.

Thus, it is argued that, in view of these problems, the model of representative democracy fits the demands of feminism in a new wave more adequately than any of these models. Representative democracy has distinctive features that take account of the specific nature of the political process in diverse societies as conflictual, partial and exclusionary. At root, the model is based on the representative relationship that does not depend on the representative sharing the same identity as the represented. Rather, the relationship is a formal and partial one that is established by the electoral process,



another distinctive feature of representative democracy.<sup>5</sup> The electoral process gives the relationship temporary definition, authorising the representative to act for the represented for as long as the electoral decision holds, leaving the latter free to pursue other political identities. The two political actors - the representative and the represented - do not need to agree over everything and their relationship can be renegotiated or revoked at the next election. For women, this representative relationship allows them to find representation in terms of their feminist identity without sacrificing their other civil concerns. Indeed, with the right institutional framework, women could have representation in terms of a number of their political identities, with each relationship being partial and temporary. Consequently, the model allows women to be politically included as both feminists and citizens, with varying levels of political commitment. In meeting these demands, it returns to the postmodern critical strategy of Chapter Two, respecting anti-essential identities, anti-utopianism and the contingency of political thought on existing political traditions and practises. Ultimately, it is argued that feminists have much to gain, in terms of movement and citizenship politics, by making strategic use of existing democratic practices and concepts of representation. They must take political action now, even in a minimal way, and not wait for utopian conditions.

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<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 42-93.



# Chapter One. The End of Movement Politics? Understanding the Place of Citizenship and Identity in the History of Feminism

## Introduction

By the early 1980s Western second wave feminism was in crisis. Its political movement had disintegrated and no cohesive feminist theory had developed from either the experiences of the movement or the gradual increase in feminist scholarship. Initially, much of the blame for this fragmentation was placed on external factors, notably the backlash of sentiment towards feminism, which developed throughout the decade. However, other feminists began to study how the *internal* workings of the second wave political movement contributed to its fragmentation. Many of these studies<sup>1</sup> have agreed that the identity politics of the second wave caused division and dissent in a movement which had attempted to build a sisterhood on the politics of personal experience.

This chapter will contend that the roots of the second wave movement's internal problems can be found in the transformation in ideas about what should be the proper objective of feminism. Between the first and the second wave movements the objective of feminism shifted from a predominating quest for formal citizenship to a quest for identity. In the first wave, Enlightenment thinking and French Revolutionary practise had inspired early feminist theorists such as Mary Wollstonecraft in Britain and Olympe de Gouges in France to seek out citizenship for women. Hence, they wanted to extend the democratic rights of citizenship to women and this demand became the main focus of the first wave political movement until the 1920s, by which time most Western women had been partially enfranchised.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) for information on the British movement. B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) on the American movement. And, D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, (London: Macmillan, 1983) on both.

The novelty of the second wave feminist movement was its move away from the inherently political concern of citizenship in favour of a far reaching concern with feminist theories as sites of, and quests for, identity recognition and affirmation. Many second wave feminists felt that this shift towards identity politics was necessary because achieving the vote and formal citizenship for women had done little to advance their social standing. Thus, feminists such as Virginia Woolf<sup>2</sup>, Simone de Beauvoir<sup>3</sup> and Betty Friedan<sup>4</sup>, who wrote between the first and second wave of feminism, introduced three sets of ideas that provided a theoretical framework for the second wave's focus on the politics of identity. Firstly, Woolf introduced a new concept of patriarchy that was developed by de Beauvoir and Friedan. Secondly, these feminists began to question the public/private divide in a way that had not been done in the first wave. Thirdly, these transitional feminists made self-identity a valid place for feminist analysis and politics.

While these ideas provided useful points of solidarity for the second wave movement, by the end of the 1970s they had given rise to a widespread emphasis on identity and selfhood that made mass movement politics difficult. And by the 1980s the movement had largely disintegrated into a mass of small groups arguing over what it meant to be a true feminist. Feminism became rife with factionalism and it was often politically inactive. Feminists stopped facing each other as feminists, to discuss liberty and equality, and became distanced from conventional political institutions and processes in which to make their demands. Indeed, many feminists ended up in the very position they had been hoping to escape: at the margins of politics. The first critiques of second wave feminism, voiced by black, lesbian and poor women, were explicit attacks on what they perceived to be the failure of the feminist movement and theories to represent and reflect their identities and experiences in the sisterhood. A sisterhood that in their view was concerned only with the interests and promotion of one kind of woman: white, middle class and professional. These criticisms were a

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<sup>2</sup> V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (London: Penguin Books, 1945).

<sup>3</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Trans. H. M. Parshley, (London: Picador, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1965).



valuable challenge to the easy assumptions of early second wave feminists. But black, lesbian and poor women tended to work with similar notions of authentic identity that only furthered the fragmentation of the movement.

Thus, to fully understand the fragmentation of second wave feminism it is necessary to place feminism in its rich and diverse historical perspective. Feminists in a new wave of theorising must learn from their history. Therefore, the first burgeoning of feminist theories will be traced, starting with their basis in the philosophy of the European Enlightenment and the politics of the French Revolution of 1789. Although feminists did not gather into a self-conscious movement until the nineteenth century, it was the ideals of this period that provided the concerns and concepts that became crucial in the first wave. The theory and practice of the first wave movement, which culminated in the struggle for suffrage, will then be examined. Once Western women achieved these political and civil rights, in the early twentieth century, the move away from citizenship towards identity politics began. The latter will be traced in the works of Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. When this transition is understood, the chapter will address the development of the Western second wave feminist movement and its problems of fragmentation and factionalism.

### **The founding of feminism**

The story of first wave feminism begins with the Enlightenment. Feminists in this period were influenced by the new philosophical ideas of equality, universalism and rational human nature.<sup>5</sup> They were also inspired by the emergence of radical and revolutionary politics. Richard Evans characterises the influence of this period on early feminism, stating:

The Enlightenment did assemble a whole battery of intellectual weapons to be wielded in the feminist cause: ideas of reason, progress, natural law, the fulfilment of the individual, the beneficent power of

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<sup>5</sup> See M. Ferguson (ed.), *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799*, (Bloomington and New York: Indiana University Press and The Feminist Press, 1985) for a thorough introduction to the writings of early British feminists.



education and the social utility of freedom from the restrictions and equality of rights.<sup>6</sup>

In light of this analysis, three areas of Enlightenment thinking will be examined in relation to their influence on first feminists: the importance of reason, the importance of autonomous selfhood, and the concepts of freedom and agency. These ideas led into a broadly humanistic view of feminism that lasted until the late nineteenth century.

### *The importance of reason*

The idea of a universal rational human nature was the fundamental tenet of French and continental Enlightenment philosophy. According to this philosophy, to possess reason meant that the individual was able to be autonomous. This picture of rational and autonomous human selfhood was first developed by Descartes<sup>7</sup> and reached its apogee in the works of thinkers such as Kant<sup>8</sup> and de Condorcet.<sup>9</sup> Kant's work is particularly relevant because he introduced the idea of the universal rational self that was nevertheless duty bound. For many early humanist feminists, these views of universal selfhood and rationality became the starting point of their theories. The early first wave humanist feminist Mary Astell believed that as long as equal recognition was denied women they would be kept in a condition akin to slavery, remaining 'useless...Animals (*sic*)'.<sup>10</sup> More famously, Wollstonecraft developed the concept of the duty bound rational self for women.<sup>11</sup> She argued passionately that women needed to be recognised as rational human beings if they were ever to fulfil their duties.

Enlightenment thinkers also used this notion of the rational human mind as a basis for their theories of education. According to many Enlightenment thinkers,

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<sup>6</sup> R. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840-1920*, (London and New York: Croom Helm and Barnes and Noble, 1977), p.17.

<sup>7</sup> R. Descartes, 'From Mediations on First Philosophy', in L. Cahoon (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 29-40.

<sup>8</sup> See I. Kant, 'Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals (1785) in, Mary. J. Gregor (ed. and Trans.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Work of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) for his classic statement of the duty bound, rational self.

<sup>9</sup> A. de Condorcet, *Sketch for the Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1955).

<sup>10</sup> M. Astell, 'A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,' in M. Ferguson (ed.), *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799*, op.cit., p.187.

Wollstonecraft and de Condorcet included, education was designed to impart a series of rational truths and immutable principles. These thinkers believed that with the correct knowledge and the proper use of reason, the human mind could be reshaped and modified.<sup>12</sup> By giving each person a basic and developing body of knowledge, moreover, education helped the individual to use their rationality with autonomy. On this basis, many feminist thinkers, such as, for example, Bathsua Pell Makin<sup>13</sup>, Catherine Macaulay Graham<sup>14</sup> and Wollstonecraft<sup>15</sup>, demanded a system of thorough, rational education for women. For all of these thinkers education was central to women's sense of autonomous selfhood; it became a way of lessening their dependence on men by giving them practical skills and the ability to reason.

### *The idea of autonomous selfhood*

These ideas of rational selfhood found their most famous feminist expression in Mary Wollstonecraft's work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. A work that was central to the arguments of many humanist feminists in the first and the second wave movements. In common with many humanist feminists of the eighteenth century, she believed that it was impossible to know the *true* nature of female identity due to women's general subordinated position.<sup>16</sup> She argued therefore that women would need to be recognised as citizens and humans before their true selves could develop. Indeed, she was adamant that, without natural human or civil rights, women had no real duties, remarking:

The wife in the present state of things, who is faithful to her husband, and neither suckles nor educates her children, scarcely deserves the

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<sup>11</sup> M. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 141, speaks of women needing to recognise and fulfil their '*human duties* (her italics)'.

<sup>12</sup> Male thinkers of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, for example Helvetius and d'Holbach, also advocated the extension of education to women, S. Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.103.

<sup>13</sup> B. Pell Makin, 'From An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen,' in M. Ferguson (ed.), *First Feminists: British Women Writers 1578-1799*, op.cit., pp. 128-142.

<sup>14</sup> C. Macaulay Graham, 'From Letters on Education: Letter XXI,' *ibid.*, pp. 400-402.

<sup>15</sup> M. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, op.cit., sets out her views on education in Chapter Twelve, pp. 279-306.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.



name of wife, and has no right to that of citizen. But take away natural rights and duties become null.<sup>17</sup>

It was enough to suggest that women, if they were not included as rational creatures, would remain little more than frilly accompaniments to their husbands. Hence, she made it clear that men and women would benefit from female emancipation. Men would gain a more practical and equal wife, whereas women would gain rational selfhood and independence.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, Wollstonecraft argued that women must be able to make autonomous decisions regardless of their biological sex. It was on this basis that Wollstonecraft argued for women to value their citizen identity over motherhood. Indeed, she went so far as to argue that:

The being who discharges the duties of its station is independent; and, speaking of women at large, their first duties is to find themselves as rational creatures, and the next, in point of importance, *as citizens*, is that, which includes so many, of a mother (my italics).<sup>19</sup>

In the context of the late eighteenth century it was very radical to argue that a woman's role as a mother be subordinated to her 'duty' to define herself first independently and then as a citizen.<sup>20</sup> This argument reflected both Wollstonecraft's view that citizenship was the key to women's humanity and her revolutionary fervour for a democratic citizenship that was coupled with the Kantian preference for duty.

### *Freedom and agency*

Many Enlightenment radicals also incorporated this view of rational selfhood as a basis for revolutionary political activity. The old idea that human beings were assigned places in society by God gave way to the idea that the individual was governed by its

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>20</sup> It is worthy of note that Carole Pateman in a recent article, 'Equality, difference, subordination: the politics of motherhood and women's citizenship, in G. Bock and S. James (eds.), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.20, cites the very same reference, suggesting that Wollstonecraft's view of citizenship supports both equality and difference. This reading undermines the humanistic intentions of Wollstonecraft, who, while recognising that women were mothers, felt that in the political realm of citizenship women should be capable of rational and autonomous thought, free

own will and rationality. Such a degree of self-reflexivity meant that customs, superstitions and prejudices, that were previously seen to be natural restraints on the self, could be reasoned away. Condorcet, gripped by revolutionary fervour, gave instant clarity to this sense of escaping from society's constraints, demanding, in *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, the 'annihilation of all prejudices',<sup>21</sup> including those prejudices that subordinated women.

The French Revolution of 1789 proved to be the defining manifestation of these Enlightenment ideals. The central motivation of the French Revolution was the idea that society could be seized and transformed. This idea was, in turn, informed by the Rousseauian idea of democratic citizenship. Rousseau argued that the only form of true sovereignty, for both self and society, was self-sovereignty brought about by a people finding self-government.<sup>22</sup> In this concept of sovereignty the subject lives by the laws that it creates, thus ensuring its autonomy and independence.

Work by Dominique Godineau on women's participation in the French Revolution suggests that female activists at the time were as committed as male activists to this idea of popular sovereignty. Although, as she notes, the actual practise of democratic citizenship often excluded the very women who supported it. Godineau therefore concludes that women found

[T]heir status was ambiguous - that of *citoyennes* [female citizens] without citizenship. On the other hand, in the case of popular insurrection, when the Sovereign People made its voice audible...women constituted an integral portion of the Sovereign.<sup>23</sup>

It is somewhat ironic to find that women - who Rousseau famously excluded from his theories of citizenship<sup>24</sup> - were also inspired by his view of sovereignty and radical agency. These women found that his view of self-sovereignty, that placed citizenship at its core, had a powerful message for women at the time: if you were excluded from

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from their family relationships. Moreover, Wollstonecraft was trying to reposition motherhood as a *human* duty.

<sup>21</sup> A. de Condorcet, *Sketch for the Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, op.cit., p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), p. 191.

<sup>23</sup> D. Godineau, 'Masculine and Feminine Political Practice during the French Revolution, 1793 - Year III,' in H. B. Applewhite and D. G. Levy (eds.), *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, (Michigan: the University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 68.



the civil law-making process, as women were, then you were not free. Early feminists took heed and began to theorise citizenship as the key to autonomous selfhood.

In the historical context of the Enlightenment, more generally, women were participating in political and intellectual life on an unprecedented scale.<sup>25</sup> They were entering intellectual circles in a number of roles: as *Salonieres* in France, as bluestockings, as scholars and as novelists (Aphra Benn et al).<sup>26</sup> And, during the French Revolution, they were members of a revolutionary grouping - the Cercle Social - that had a women's section and fought for women's rights.<sup>27</sup> Outside of these rather intellectual groupings, women participated in strikes and in violent insurgent activities, gaining widespread notoriety as *petroleuses*. It was these types of groups that gave women at the time invaluable experience of modern, radical activist movements.

The Enlightenment and the French Revolution therefore provided the intellectual and political context for early feminist thought to develop. Enlightenment ideas of universal reason, autonomous selfhood and radical agency inspired first feminists to theorise women's emancipation and participate in political activity. Further, Enlightenment thinkers such as Wollstonecraft and de Condorcet illustrated the importance of political activity for women by endorsing citizenship and civic duty as a means of achieving independent and rational selfhood. For feminists, moreover, citizenship brought a further benefit, it gave women legal recognition as equal human

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<sup>24</sup> S. Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, op.cit., p. 145.

<sup>25</sup> See the D. Godineau article, 'Masculine and Feminine Political Practice during the French Revolution, 1793 - Year III,' op.cit., pp. 61-80, in which she documents how women helped with an assassination of a deputy and for a more general discussion of women's revolutionary activities, Also in the same collection, H. B. Applewhite and D. G. Levy (eds.), *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, ibid., see the article by D. Levy and H. Applewhite, 'Women, Radicalization and the Fall of the French Monarchy,' pp. 81-107.

<sup>26</sup> E. Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time*, (Revised ed., Vol. 2, Newbury Park, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992), pp. 119-139, sets out the social and political activities of women during the Enlightenment.

<sup>27</sup> Again the importance of Rousseau's thought to women, and feminist, activists is noted by Gary Kates, 'The Powers of Husband and Wife must be Equal and Separate': The Cercle Social and the Rights of Women, 1790-91,' in H. B. Applewhite and D. G. Levy (eds.), *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, op.cit, p. 176. Here, he argues that members of Cercle Social saw themselves as disciples of Rousseau. This meant that, 'Cercle Social feminists simply ignored Rousseau's attitudes regarding the status of women in civil society and emphasised, instead, his view that no political revolution would be successful without a corresponding transformation in family life'.

beings. In the 1800s women came together in their own movements to seize this humanistic recognition.

### **Feminism in the 1800s: the organisation of a movement**

The main focus of first wave feminist movements was the quest for citizenship, although this undoubtedly led into other concerns. However, not all feminists shared the same view of feminist citizenship and there was a split between humanist and gynocentric feminists.<sup>28</sup> Most first wave feminists were humanist feminists, emphasising the universal, rational self. They argued for legislation that would equalise male/female relations, believing that the autonomy of the individual was paramount over family relationships and dependence on others. Wollstonecraft's feminist tract, in particular, inspired a whole generation of humanist female writers and theorists.<sup>29</sup> Her humanist vision of citizenship, as a means to freedom and equality for women, underpinned the founding of the first feminist political movement in America. In Britain her humanist ideals were continued in J. S. Mill's *The Subjection of Women*.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, gynocentric feminists, such as Frances Power Cobbe, recognised and celebrated sex and gender distinctions, often seeking protective legislation that reflected a social and biological division between men and women. Hence it is necessary to consider both gynocentric and humanist feminist views of citizenship and how these views manifested themselves in movement politics.

#### *Humanist feminist views of citizenship*

In America and Britain the humanist view of citizenship inspired the establishment of the first feminist political movements. In America, the first women's movement began

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<sup>28</sup> First wave feminist interpretations of citizenship were not homogeneous. The most useful distinction to make in terms of feminist thought is Iris Marion Young's differentiation between humanist and gynocentric feminism, I. M. Young, *Throwing Like a girl*, (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1990), p.73. I have applied this distinction to the historical roots of feminism.

<sup>29</sup> Miriam Schneir, (ed.), *The Vintage Book of Historical Feminism*, (London: Vintage, 1972), p. 6, notes that it was published in the USA when it came out in 1792, and was republished in the 1860s as the first wave movement was underway.

<sup>30</sup> J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1980).



in 1848 at Seneca Falls, New York.<sup>31</sup> At this convention women formulated a declaration of rights, based on the American Declaration of Independence, containing twelve resolutions that the convention wanted to achieve politically. These resolutions included the recognition that women were equal to men, and promises to enshrine this equality in a set of political, civil and religious rights.<sup>32</sup> The women at Seneca Falls wanted these reforms for purely humanist reasons, to enable women to achieve autonomous selfhood. Consequently, the constitution explicitly attacked customs and laws that would 'lessen her self-respect and...make her willing to lead a *dependent and abject life (my italics)*'.<sup>33</sup>

The American context, in general, with its own revolutionary background and pioneering spirit, gave rise to some of the most individualistic variants of humanist feminism.<sup>34</sup> The nineteenth century American feminist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, delivered an important speech outlining these views. It was entitled *The Solitude of the Self* and showed just how far the humanist feminist demand for autonomous selfhood had come since Wollstonecraft. In the speech Stanton suggested that 'the isolation of every human soul and the necessity of self-dependence must give each individual the right to choose his (sic) own surroundings'.<sup>35</sup> For Stanton it was intrinsic to this search for autonomy that women be given citizenship as well as other rights, so that each would be able to fully recognise 'her self-sovereignty'. She added that without this recognition, women would remain determined by the '*incidental* relations of life, such as a mother, wife, sister, daughter' (my italics).<sup>36</sup> For Stanton, therefore, rational autonomous selfhood meant complete independence of thought for women, aside from their traditional relationships.

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<sup>31</sup> M. Schneir, (ed.), *The Vintage Book of Historical Feminism*, op.cit., p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> These resolutions are set out in M. Schneir, *ibid.*, pp. 80-82, and included the right to the franchise and participation in the workplace.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> For examples of American first wave feminist thought see, M. Schneir, *The Vintage Book of Historical Feminism*, *ibid.*, pp. 76-159.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

In Britain, J. S. Mill's, *The Subjection of Women* (first published, 1869) was stating humanist feminist ideals in a more moderate, but no less inspiring, manner than Stanton's work. Mill's humanism still envisioned a traditional role for women as wives and mothers. However, he believed that by equalising the relationship between the sexes, women could then begin to freely and rationally choose these roles, so that they lose their oppressive connotations. To equalise the relationship between the sexes, Mill reasserted the ideals of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. According to Mill, the nineteenth century had lost sight of these ideals, replacing the infallibility of reason with the infallibility of instinct.<sup>37</sup> He believed it was necessary to retrieve the era's sense of equality and justice to challenge current social relations between men and women and give women their individual freedom.<sup>38</sup> Mill's liberal interpretation of the philosophy of the Enlightenment re-emphasised how progress in society and in human nature would make this possible. Thus Mill came to the optimistic conclusion that the legal and civil reform of women's status would lead to wholesale change in the customs and prejudices that had so far subordinated women, amounting, no less, to the 'moral regeneration of mankind'.<sup>39</sup> Such optimism came to typify the first wave feminist quest for citizenship.

Hence, humanist feminists in the nineteenth century believed that it was possible to theorise a set of universal principles that could secure equal rights for women. Like the early humanist feminists of the Enlightenment, they believed that these rights needed to be legally and legislatively secured before women could truly achieve autonomous selfhood and independence from men. Their position contrasts strongly with the stance of 'moral' or gynocentric feminists in the 1800s, such as Margaret Oliphant and Frances Power Cobbe, who demanded citizenship to legally affirm the equal worth of women's distinct values and traditional domestic roles.

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<sup>36</sup> When Stanton wrote the speech she did not consider these duties to be unworthwhile for women, she only objected to the fact that they were not freely chosen. She believed moreover that when these familial duties had come to an end, women needed to be able to live independently, *ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>37</sup> J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.



### *Gynocentric feminist views of citizenship*

By the late nineteenth century gynocentric feminists were criticising the humanist hegemony. Their writing reacted to the Enlightenment and nineteenth century liberal ideas of the self-reflexive, autonomous individual. These feminists wanted instead to support and promote women's conventional place in the home. They wrote in the Victorian era and, thus, their work was often moral in tone and never really questioned the biological sex divide, as first wave humanist feminists had done.<sup>40</sup> Two examples of first wave gynocentric thinking were the works of Margaret Oliphant and Frances Power Cobbe.

Margaret Oliphant's work epitomises the ambiguous stance of many English Victorian feminists. She started by eschewing humanist equality and suggesting that the specificity of women was 'not as human creatures primarily, and women in second place, but as women and nothing but women - a distinct sphere of being'.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, she went so far as to argue that 'equality is the mightiest of humbugs'.<sup>42</sup> By the late 1800s however she was seeing some worth in the opinions of those she had previously decried as the "shrieking sisterhood".<sup>43</sup> She believed, for example, that it was vital that women be given recognition for their contributions in the home, citing the example of the important role of shopkeepers' wives to support her view.<sup>44</sup> She even called for the franchise to be extended to women who were taxpayers.<sup>45</sup> In all, Oliphant wanted women to be recognised as having equal civil worth to men but different social capacities.

Frances Power Cobbe also adopted the equality in difference approach. She used an apparently neo-Hegelian analysis of women's position in society to argue for their greater civil and political recognition. While she does not directly mention

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> S. Hamilton's (ed.), *'Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors': Victorian Writing by Women on Women*, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1992) is a useful documentation of Victorian feminist writing.

<sup>41</sup> M. Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women,' in, S. Hamilton (ed.), *'Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors': Victorian Writing by Women on Women*, ibid., p. 216.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

Hegel's theories, there is evidence that she considered men and women to have a dialectical relationship to one another. Hence, for Power Cobbe men and women needed to aim for equality through the unification of their distinctive standpoints. In this process they combine to create a kind of 'Hegelian synthesis' (my wording), in which 'absolute Philosophy is both intuitive and experimental; absolute Morality is both justice and love; absolute Religion is the worship...of the 'Parent of God, Almighty,' who is both parents in One'.<sup>46</sup> Power Cobbe also emphasised the need for protective legislation to ensure women were legally recognised and defended from such things as marital brutality.<sup>47</sup>

Gynocentric feminism became more important as feminists in the first wave movement realised that they also had to appeal to those women whom valued their roles as mothers and homekeepers. Indeed, if one were to provide a women's, as opposed to a feminist, history, it would be clear that feminism and active *feminist* politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were minor features in most women's lives.<sup>48</sup> In this moral and political climate it is hardly surprising that some feminists saw the strategic value of making feminism, as a whole, appeal to more moderate women. Their stance also helped soften the view of those male public and political decision makers who remained wary of, and often hostile to, the demand for women's citizenship.

The work of Millicent Fawcett exemplifies the strategic thinking of many first wave feminists. She was at the forefront of the campaign for women's suffrage and believed in reason and individualism.<sup>49</sup> But, from the late 1800s, she feared that the feminist movement was increasingly seen as revolutionary and anarchistic.<sup>50</sup> Thus she wrote a very pragmatic piece placating both women who felt that it was 'unwomanly'

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 243

<sup>46</sup> F. Power Cobbe, 'What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?' in S. Hamilton (ed.), *Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors': Victorian Writing by Women on Women*, ibid., p. 106.

<sup>47</sup> F. Power Cobbe, 'Wife-torture in England,' ibid., pp. 132-171.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 68, notes that, numerically, the membership of feminist organisations was negligible compared to that of such associations as the Women's Institute.

<sup>49</sup> See Susan Hamilton's bibliographic note on Fawcett, *Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors': Victorian Writing by Women on Women*, op.cit., p. 269.



to push for liberation and critics who feared that feminist women would reject motherhood and doom the human race in the process. In this piece Fawcett went on to stress that women should have political representation and be politically active because of their difference from men:

We do not advocate the representation of women because there is no difference between men and women; but rather because of the difference between them. We want women's special experience as women, their special knowledge of the home and home wants, of child life...to be brought to bear on legislation.<sup>51</sup>

Fawcett was exceedingly successful in her approach and used it to attract a wide constituency of women in her role as leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) and by the 1910s the organisation had a membership of over 50,000 women.<sup>52</sup>

Hence, the rise of gynocentric feminist theories provided another dimension to first wave feminist discourse and signalled a flexibility of approach that helped the first wave movement adapt in a variety of ways to the outbreak of World War One. In times of war new, emergency styles of politics usually emerge and feminist politics was no exception to this rule.<sup>53</sup> Some sections of the British movement, faithful to Christabel Pankhurst, became highly patriotic, fearing that the continuation of their militant tactics would undermine the unity of the country.<sup>54</sup> Fawcett, ever the opportunist, used the experience of war and women's contribution to the war effort to argue that women could be socially valuable if only they had democratic representation.<sup>55</sup> In America, many feminists adhered more to humanist feminist ideological calls for citizenship. Hence, some of them, to popular disapproval,

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<sup>50</sup> M. Fawcett, 'The Emancipation of Women,' *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259,

<sup>52</sup> M. Pugh argues in, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, *op.cit.*, p. 8, that such suffrage unions were very successful at engaging with British parliamentary politics and making political alliances and affiliations. However, in being so active, the failure to gain the vote became frustrating for first wave feminists. In Britain bills to extend the franchise to women were introduced with great regularity and were passed in the House of Commons 1870, 1884, 1904 and 1908, but vetoed by the Lords, R. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840-1920*, *op.cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>53</sup> See Martin Pugh's chapter, 'The Impact of the Great War,' *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, *op.cit.*, pp. 6-42.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

demonstrated in front of President Woodrow Wilson, to suggest that it was incongruous to wage a war in the name of democracy, while at the same time continuing to withhold the electoral franchise from American women.<sup>56</sup> But still the quest for citizenship remained the one unifying thread between the fragments of theories, tactics and movement sectors in the first wave. This connection allowed women to be mobilised and the movement to be galvanised even during a war.

When democratic citizenship was finally achieved, in Britain by 1928 and across America by 1920, feminism lost its united focal point; the convergence of objectives that link, for example, a gynocentric feminist such as Frances Power Cobbe and a humanist feminist such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. However, Kate Millet and, more recently, Barbara Ryan argue that first wave feminists concentrated on the Enlightenment ideal of democratic citizenship at the expense of other issues and, thus, left women after the first wave in a vulnerable position.<sup>57</sup> What is misunderstood in these criticisms is the great sense of optimism most first wave feminists had, stretching back at least as far as Wollstonecraft, that obtaining the vote and civil rights would end women's subordination. This optimism was compounded by the fact that in Europe, during the decades leading up to the extension of the suffrage, legislation had been passed allowing married women to own property and women in general to enter the professions. In the eyes of many of the first wave humanist feminists, most of who were by then elderly, citizenship completed this gamut of rights. For the gynocentric feminists, these developments were useful to their cause and democratic representation increased the weight of their moral concerns; indeed, prohibition in America was one of the first effects of women's voting power, which proved to be highly conservative.

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<sup>56</sup> R. Evans, *The Feminists: Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe, America and Australasia, 1840-1920*, op.cit., p. 195.

<sup>57</sup> Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics*, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971), p.83, pronounces the vote to be the 'red herring' of the movement. Similarly, Barbara Ryan in *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, op.cit., p. 37, blames the disintegration of the movement, after the franchise was extended, on the quest for formal



## **Into the second wave: feminism from the 1920s onwards**

Many of the feminists who started writing in the 1920s faced a new political and social situation to that of first wave feminists. Women had gained formal legal and citizenship rights, but their social status remained largely unchanged. The optimism of the first wave faltered as 1920s feminists looked at this range of rights and legislation and asked: 'what went wrong?' In answer, they began to look beyond civil and political rights and in the transition period to the second wave three new ideas emerged that provided the theoretical groundwork for a move towards identity politics. The first idea was the new concept of patriarchy posited by Virginia Woolf, which was developed much later in the works of Millet<sup>58</sup> and Daly.<sup>59</sup> The second idea, resulting from the new approach to patriarchy, was a concern with women's sense of personal identity as a legitimate area of feminist analysis. Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir were at the forefront of this latter approach. The third idea was the radical re-conception of the public/private divide - between the public-political sphere and the domestic sphere - which had largely been maintained in the first wave. Each approach will be examined in turn to understand how the shift to identity politics took place.

### *Woolf and the new concept of patriarchy*

Virginia Woolf was paramount in introducing a new approach to patriarchy. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf remarks that on the night women achieved the vote she found an aunt had left her an inheritance of five hundred pounds. Significantly for Woolf it was the latter that she found to be the key to her liberation.<sup>60</sup> She thus set out to examine why the legal and civil changes wrought by first wave feminists had done so little to alter the status of women. She concluded rather starkly that, 'England is

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citizenship, arguing that the movement did not develop a 'multi-faceted,' and 'deeply ingrained' ideology that could sustain the movement into the 1920s.

<sup>58</sup> K. Millet, *Sexual Politics*, op.cit.,

<sup>59</sup> M. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, ((Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

<sup>60</sup> V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, op.cit., p. 38.

under the rule of patriarchy'.<sup>61</sup> In this patriarchy, according to Woolf, men hold all the political, legal and economic power.

Her definition of patriarchy was rooted in what would now be termed a 'structural' or 'systematic' analysis. A structural analysis does not necessarily have to specify the origin of patriarchy, but it must account for the social reproduction of it through social and economic systems.<sup>62</sup> On the basis of this reading there is nothing inherently natural about the power men are seen to have over women, it is a social construct. As Woolf writes, 'their [men's] education had been in some ways as faulty as my own. It had bred in them defects as great'.<sup>63</sup> Patriarchy thus becomes a way of socially constructing identity that is reproduced through the social system as a whole. According to Woolf's argument, society educates men to produce in them a greater freedom of mind, creates economic laws that give them the freedom to be the primary wage earners, and allows them the authority to make laws, thus perpetuating the whole patriarchal cycle. Hence, for Woolf men had real power over women and the comforting illusion that they were innately superior.

Woolf's view of patriarchy differed to previous feminist analyses of male power by making it clear that patriarchy was entrenched. Social and legal tinkering would not alter the power men held over women because part of this power lay in the different perceptions of self men and women had; men were nurtured to believe they were superior and women were nurtured to believe they were dependent. In her view patriarchal power not only subordinated women, it also set up a coalition of values that were found to be *intrinsically* alienating by women, as these were 'male' values.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> The advantages of the structural analysis, and one Woolf identifies, is that the actions of individual men are not blamed for the ill-effects of patriarchy on women. As Woolf, *ibid.*, pp. 39-40, asserts, 'it is absurd to blame any class or any sex, as a whole. Great bodies of people are never responsible for what they do'.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, this position is closer to gynocentric positions that hold that men and women have differing values, than it is to humanist feminist positions, that Woolf, *ibid.*, p. 111, was sympathetic to. According to humanist feminists, the universal possession of the rational core self meant that, via the use of this reason, universal 'human' values would become clear. In Woolf's vision women should still strive for human selfhood, but the concept of the human becomes one in which the female identity is partially preserved, and her work thus appears as a sort of halfway house between humanist and gynocentric feminist positions.



Thus, she imagines a woman reading the literary works of Kipling and Galsworthy and discovering that, 'it is not only that they celebrate male values, enforce male values and describe the world of men; it is that the emotion with which these books are permeated is to a woman incomprehensible'.<sup>65</sup> Thus, Woolf established a concept of patriarchy deeply embedded in social structures, values and identities.

Woolf's concept of patriarchy reached its apogee in second wave feminist views of patriarchy and revolution. For many second wave feminists this argument made it necessary to reject conventional models of democratic citizenship and seek, instead, to revolutionise the whole social system. Kate Millet's work, *Sexual Politics*,<sup>66</sup> made the link between patriarchy and the need for revolutionary politics. She believed, like Woolf, that patriarchy developed and maintained its control through a range of social and economic institutions, including the family, the economic system and the educational structure. Consequently, on her account, patriarchy so totally defines women that it determines their temperament, role and status,<sup>67</sup> leaving men and women confined to 'two cultures'.<sup>68</sup> Hence, Millet called for a 'sexual revolution' to end patriarchal divisions, writing, 'for to actually change the quality of life is to transform personality, and this cannot be done without freeing human's from the tyranny of sexual-social category'.<sup>69</sup> For the second wave, in general, the new concept of patriarchy signalled a return to radical, activist politics.

### *The quest for identity*

The new approach to patriarchy allowed feminists in the transition to the second wave to realign feminist objectives. By looking at de Beauvoir's and Friedan's work we can see the shift to issues of identity that marked out the second wave from the first. Whilst neither thinker interpreted identity politics in the radical manner of later second wave feminist thought, they sowed the theoretical seeds for such a development. Both

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>66</sup> K. Millet, *Sexual Politics*, op.cit.

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, in Millet's view, subjects' ibid., it is 'probable that no other system has ever exercised such a complete control over its p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

thinkers examined the patriarchal construction of female identity, through a 'myth of woman' and a 'feminine mystique' respectively.<sup>70</sup> And both suggested that these myths presented women with an identity that was restrictive, oppressive and lacking in a coherent, autonomous sense of selfhood.<sup>71</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir believed that women were socially constructed by the 'myth of woman'. The myth started within family relationships, in which parents raised insipid girls and torrid boys.<sup>72</sup> According to de Beauvoir, the latter were encouraged from childhood to transcend their limits and to strive for 'human' selfhood. As she argued, in a frequently cited passage, men's freedom thus lay in their socially unimpeded ability to achieve authentic selfhood:

But for a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty...he does not let himself be transcended by others, he is himself at the heart of his subjectivity. Violence is the authentic proof of each one's loyalty to himself.<sup>73</sup>

For de Beauvoir, therefore, women's lack of self was not just a *response* to public exclusion; women were excluded from the public sphere *because* the 'myth of woman' taught them to forgo the autonomous sense of selfhood necessary for public relationships. In short, the little girl was left clinging to her mother's skirts as the little boy fought for public dominance.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was inspired by de Beauvoir's work. In the work Friedan observes a generation of American women who have apparently been sold a feminine dream revolving around maternity, consumerism and sexuality; these ideals were personified by the stereotype (and actuality!) of the American suburban housewife. By the mid-1950s a large number of educated, middle class women who had followed this lifestyle were, according to Friedan, dosed up on

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 363.

<sup>70</sup> See S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* op.cit., and B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, op.cit.

<sup>71</sup> B. Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique*, op.cit., p. 79, suggested that women faced an identity crisis.

<sup>72</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* op.cit, pp. 295-351, describes this process of gender socialisation.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 354. The main difficulty of de Beauvoir's approach is that what she considers to be an 'authentic' human self explicitly reflects what she also considers to be a 'male' self. Conflating male and female selfhood in this way raises doubts as to whether her view of the self counts as 'human' and whether women could ever attain it or wish to attain it.



Valium and extremely dissatisfied with life.<sup>74</sup> The cause of this was identity, or rather, 'lack of identity'. So chronic was this lack of identity that women were beginning to discover that they had no options for self-fulfilment beyond that offered by the 'feminine mystique'. Consequently, women perpetuated the mystique by trying harder to find satisfaction in their household appliances, children and sex.<sup>75</sup> In effect they were turning to the very things that had caused the dissatisfaction in the first place. Like de Beauvoir, Friedan also believed that feminism needed to begin with these private issues of identity, before it could engage with the public sphere.<sup>76</sup>

In some respects Friedan and de Beauvoir's theories of incomplete selfhood resonated with first wave feminist demands for autonomous selfhood provided by, among others, Wollstonecraft and Cady Stanton. But the difference lay in the second wave's predominating emphasis on problems of identity and their lack of faith in the democratic system to solve them. Moreover, de Beauvoir and Friedan's theories also bolstered the idea, begun by Woolf, that women's incapacity to achieve such a human identity was due to a patriarchally defined cultural hegemony - such as the 'myth of woman' and the 'feminine mystique'. For Friedan and de Beauvoir simply including women in citizenship would not be enough to overturn these myths. Hence, they began a quest for identity transformation that reached its zenith in the works of second wave radical feminists, such as Shulamith Firestone<sup>77</sup> and Mary Daly,<sup>78</sup> who endorsed a radical view of the authentic, autonomous human self that could only be achieved in separatist, women-only societies.

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<sup>74</sup> See Chapter Two, entitled, 'Happy Housewife Heroine', for a detailed account of these social processes, B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, op.cit., pp. 33-68.

<sup>75</sup> Friedan saw the new openness about sex in the 1950s, not as liberation for women, but as further indication of the grip that the feminine mystique was perceived to have on women. This manifested itself in 'sex without self, sex for lack of self,' *ibid.*, p. 278

<sup>76</sup> Ironically Friedan's analysis did not find such radical expression in her political objectives, where she favoured liberal strategy to improve women's situation. The political group - the National Organisation of Women (NOW) - that she helped found went on to become one of the bastions of liberal reformist feminism in the United States (although Friedan considered it to be radical in intent), B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, op.cit., p. 61.

<sup>77</sup> S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971).

### *Challenging the public/private divide*

In the transition to the second wave, this emphasis on personal identity and its social formation meant that the public/private distinction was subjected to far more rigorous challenges than in the first wave. Elizabeth Frazer in a piece on the relationship between feminism and liberalism shows how first wave feminists tended to maintain a public/family divide, even if they were aware of the problems in domestic relationships.<sup>79</sup> Hence, she writes of Wollstonecraft, Mill and Stanton that they ‘maintain the conception of the political as distinct from and excluding the family, as coextensive with legislation and its enforcement, and the securing of constitutional and legal rights for the individual’.<sup>80</sup> In other words, first wave feminists, by separating the family from the public, could argue for equal rights for women in the public sphere without ever really challenging their private status as mothers or their position in the household. Further, as this chapter has shown, early humanist feminists saw the public-political sphere as the proper realm in which to give women rights and duties to aid their role in private. This liberal humanist position was compounded by the view of first wave gynocentric feminists who also maintained the public/private divide, considering the private sphere to be the proper realm for women’s self-fulfilment.

In contrast, the work of nineteenth and early twentieth century socialist feminists, such as, for example, Harriet Martineau, Mona Caird and Olive Schreiner, laid the foundations for the study of private relationships and began to question the public/private distinction. They meticulously detailed the conditions of women’s everyday lives, portraying the private sphere as a place in need of direct political intervention.<sup>81</sup> The new conception of patriarchy, just detailed, added to these views, analysing the private sphere and identity formation to see how women were oppressed.

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<sup>78</sup> M. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

<sup>79</sup> E. Frazer, ‘Feminism and Liberalism’ in J. Meadowcroft (ed.), *The Liberal Political Tradition: Contemporary Reappraisals*, (Cheltenham and Brookfield: Edward Elgar, 1996), pp. 126-128.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>81</sup> See H. Martineau, ‘Female industry,’ pp. 29-70, and Mona Caird, ‘Marriage,’ pp. 271-288 in S. Hamilton (ed.), *Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors’: Victorian Writing by Women on Women*,



Thus, by the second wave many feminists had come to believe that women's status as mothers and their place in the household contributed to their subordination, and that simple legislative measures would not change this situation. Consequently, some feminists in the transition to the second wave, such as de Beauvoir and in the early second wave, for example, Germaine Greer<sup>82</sup> and Shulamith Firestone,<sup>83</sup> rejected traditional motherhood and looked at alternative family arrangements. Further, many second wave feminists believed that women's subordinate position in the private sphere was the locus of their identity problems and, in effect, left them so unsure of themselves that it stopped them participating politically. Thus, as the second wave developed, the private increasingly became the stuff of politics - captured in the ubiquitous movement slogan, 'the personal is political'.

These three ideas - the new concept of patriarchy, the new concern for identity and the emphasis on private relationships - provided the three cornerstones of much second wave feminism. Most second wave feminists looked for deeply embedded patriarchal structures that oppressed women, not only by subordinating them but also by distorting their personal identity. The ubiquitous response of the second wave movement was to spotlight the private sphere and consider ways for women to transform their personal lives and identities; a radical feminist movement was reborn.

### **Second wave feminism: the search for identity**

It is important to note from the outset that the British and American second wave movements were always diverse. Women joined many different groups to achieve unity, sameness and solidarity. Consequently, second wave feminists developed a number of different workings of identity, objectives and strategies. In the early to middle second wave humanist feminists dominated and became a medley of liberal feminists, socialist feminists and radical feminists. By the late 1970s, gynocentric feminists were again challenging the humanist feminist concept of identity, arguing for

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*op.cit.* See also, Olive Schreiner, 'Women and Labour,' in M. Humm (ed.), *Feminisms: A Reader*, (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 18-20.

<sup>82</sup> G. Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1970) p. 235.

a return to the values of mothering and femininity. Both groups need to be examined to understand the second wave movement.

### *Second wave humanist feminists*

Most humanist feminists in the second wave believed that women needed to find self-fulfilment away from their traditional identities as mothers and housewives. Its more liberal strand was exemplified by Betty Friedan and the ideas of the NOW organisation in America. NOW favoured traditional liberal political methods to get equal rights legislation passed and to allow women to enter into the public sphere of the professions and politics. However, the humanist position was not a purely liberal one because at its most extreme the liberal belief in reformist politics was forsaken for revolutionary strategy.

In Britain humanist feminists tended to favour socialist and Marxist politics.<sup>84</sup> They questioned the institutions of family and marriage, believing them to be the sites of women's specific exploitation. To this end, these feminists applied traditional Marxist concepts to women's social position and argued that they were doubly exploited in their role as producers and in their role as the reproducers of children. However, as David Bouchier documents, socialist feminists developed two sorts of political strategies to fight for their cause. The first strategy was a reformist emphasis on working with the labour movement to bring about wider social changes. The second strategy was more radical and demanded a revolutionary theory and practice to overthrow capitalism, thus ending all forms of oppression, including women's.<sup>85</sup>

The third strand of humanist feminism was informed by existential philosophy. It consisted of those feminists who believed that women needed to break free of their inauthentic identities and strive for a true sense of selfhood. Shulamith

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<sup>83</sup> S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution*, op.cit., p. 81.

<sup>84</sup> D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, op.cit., pp. 67-73.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83- 84.



Firestone and Mary Daly were two examples of radical humanist feminists.<sup>86</sup> The latter, inspired by de Beauvoir, believed that patriarchy excludes women and physically and spiritually mutilates them through its myths, media and religion. For Daly men were simply 'the Enemy'.<sup>87</sup> According to this argument, women could only achieve authentic selfhood by rejecting their biological desires and, instead, searching for their 'Original self,' and 'original Integrity'. This strand of humanist feminism became influential in the radical sector of the second wave movement, culminating in separatist political strategies. From Friedan to Daly it is clear, therefore, that the humanist position contained many workings of identity politics and many political strategies.

### *Second wave gynocentric feminists*

Towards the middle to late 1970s a new position developed in second wave feminism that echoed the concerns of the gynocentric feminists of the first wave, such as Oliphant and Power Cobbe. Second wave gynocentrists believed, along with humanist feminists, that the differences in gender identity were socially constructed; this is the belief that one is socialised into being a man or a woman. However, gynocentrism gave the argument a new slant, arguing that, although the gender divide is determined by societal factors, the historical longevity of these roles made them socially necessary. As Sara Ruddick argued, 'I am increasingly convinced that there are female traditions and practices out of which a distinctive kind of thinking has developed'.<sup>88</sup> According to this thinking, gender differences are to all intents and purposes inherent and cannot simply be overridden in favour of a 'human' identity. This thinking departs from that of second wave humanist feminists, who accepted the theory of

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<sup>86</sup> Given the separatist sentiments of Daly and Firestone, some people may doubt whether they should be placed in the humanist feminist category. However, while I agree with Iris Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, op.cit., p. 82, that Daly's is at the least a 'transition work' to gynocentric feminist positions, I would also point out that Daly's rejection of motherhood does not let her fit easily into the gynocentric camp. Thus, to try and get some sense of the ambivalent position of both Firestone and Daly, I have defined them as 'radical humanist feminists'.

<sup>87</sup> M. Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, op.cit., p. 28.

<sup>88</sup> S. Ruddick, 'Maternal Thinking,' in D. Tietjens Meyers (ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 587.

socially constructed, differential gender identity, but believed that such distinctions should be transformed.

One of the most important gynocentric positions was and continues to be 'maternalism', or 'maternal thinking'. It incorporates thinkers such as Jean Bethke Elshtain and Sara Ruddick.<sup>89</sup> They have analysed the mothering role, arguing that, in spite of feminism and advances in reproductive technology, women continue to have children and remain the primary caregivers to children and family members more generally. They controversially assert that this situation is not purely because of patriarchal society compelling women to have children. Rather, they suggest that women might actually choose to have children and find raising children to be a positive experience in their lives. Further, maternalists argue that, even if women were not making such a choice freely, the continued tendency of women to be the primary caregiver means that these experiences stand as a source of values that men do not share. Indeed, Sara Ruddick has argued that fathers need to adopt a mothering role in relation to their children and benefit from women's long tradition of distinctive values of care.<sup>90</sup>

By asserting the positive value of mothering, maternal thinkers have also sought to revise Millet and Friedan's portrayal of women as the victims of a patriarchy that totally defines and oppresses them. This revision has been one of their most enduring points of analysis and recently the maternalist Elshtain has reassessed the private/public distinction to consider the wider value of women's private roles.<sup>91</sup> Elshtain's work argues that women have been powerful in their private mothering and domestic roles and states that this has not been recognised due to male, and one might add humanist feminist theories, that have perceived the public sphere as the site of 'proper' power and political action. Consequently, these later theories have dismissed women's private roles, portraying them as apolitical and politically powerless because

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<sup>89</sup> J. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*, (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981), and S. Ruddick, 'Maternal Thinking,' op.cit., pp. 584-603.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 598.

<sup>91</sup> J. Elshtain, 'The Power and Powerlessness of Women,' in G. Bock and S. James, (eds.), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, op.cit., p. 116.



they have not been involved in the public sphere as much as men.<sup>92</sup> For Elshtain it is necessary therefore to revise traditional concepts of political power, to take into account women's distinctive experiences of it.

Within the general gynocentric stance there are a number of divisions over strategy. Jean Bethke Elshtain is a moderate gynocentric feminist in terms of strategy. She believes that the best way to achieve gynocentric aims is to engage with traditional political sites and institutions, and traditional concepts of politics'.<sup>93</sup> However, this approach does not go far enough for many gynocentric feminists. They fear that such moderation privileges traditional, male political values and is thus dangerously close to an anti-feminist standpoint. Hence, more radical gynocentrists, such as Luce Irigaray, demand that women's values are juxtaposed with, and endorsed independently of, male values to protect women's special identity.<sup>94</sup>

At the extreme end of this thinking, some second wave gynocentric feminists felt that it would never be possible to transform male values by engaging in conventional politics. Thus, they joined radical humanist feminists, like Mary Daly, in favouring separatism. They demanded not just that women follow non-traditional forms of politics - a common strategy in the second wave movement - but that women should create and eventually inhabit a totally different sphere to men, in which their superior values could find unimpeded expression. The most extremist separatist position, in its gynocentric formulation, is found in the writings of second wave, radical lesbian feminists such as Charlotte Bunch<sup>95</sup> and Adrienne Rich.<sup>96</sup> They suggested that separatism meant complete 'women-centredness' and that a woman could only be an 'authentic' feminist if she was also a lesbian.

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<sup>92</sup> See J. Bethke Elshtain, *ibid.*, pp. 112-114, for a discussion of how power has traditionally been defined.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>94</sup> Irigaray is an interesting example, in this regard, because although she believes in a distinctive 'feminine' way of being, and encourages radical action in its name, she is wary of simply overturning male dominance in favour of women's values. She believes that this action in itself is equivalent to the male quest for dominance that is anathema to women, L. Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is Not One,' in L. Nicholson (ed.), *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 329.

<sup>95</sup> C. Bunch, 'Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education,' in M. Humm (ed.), *Feminisms: A Reader*, *op.cit.*, pp. 171-174.

The separatist position was increasingly influential in the movement by the early 1980s and not just among gynocentric feminists. In Britain, the experiences of women protesting against missiles at Greenham Common gave many feminists a taste for women-only communities.<sup>97</sup> Further, many humanist feminists, who had been extremely negative about so-called 'feminine' values, welcomed this revival in the movement's politics, feeling that such statements might broaden the appeal of feminism. Indeed, Betty Friedan, a figurehead for liberal humanist feminism, moved towards this position in the 1980s.<sup>98</sup> In general, therefore, by the early 1980s there was a widespread distrust of conventional political processes in both the British and American movements. Most feminists were interested in finding alternative political strategies and models, and often, separatist political forums for women. Ann Ferguson, a maternalist and a socialist feminist, summed up this call for alternative political models, stating,

[the] women's movement must continue to build an oppositional culture and politics that validates social, egalitarian parenting...Only in this way can we strengthen ourselves as women and as mothers to use the current contradictions between masculine sex/affective production based in the family and the ongoing development of state capitalist society in a struggle to challenge public patriarchy as a system of male domination.<sup>99</sup>

It is clear from this brief history that the British and American movements were always fragmented and never amounted to sisterhoods. There was a divide between humanist feminists and gynocentric feminists throughout the second wave period. The former dominated in the early part of the second wave and believed that women should aim for equality with men and strive for autonomous selfhood. For many humanist feminists this meant rejecting traditional female values and models of identity that they saw as oppressive, relegating women to a life of private dependence. Gynocentric feminists came to the fore in the late 1970s, arguing that women had

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<sup>96</sup> A. Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,' *ibid.*, pp. 176-180.

<sup>97</sup> D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, *op.cit.*, pp. 193-4.

<sup>98</sup> B. Friedan, *The Second Stage*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1982) pp. 45-46, contemplates whether the call for equality has been workable or whether it has closed down women's choices and made feminism unappealing to those women who might cherish their role in the home.



distinct values that needed to be protected, preferably in women-only spaces. It is necessary however to understand how the movement shifted from containable fragmentation to destructive factionalism and finally, disintegration.

### **The fragmentation of second wave feminism**

The main reason for the fragmentation of the movement was the second wave concern with identity which bound different interpretations of liberty and equality into what it meant to be, and to live as, an 'authentic' feminist. This desire for authenticity was coupled with extensive political utopianism in the second wave that left feminists politically marginalised. Identity politics also caused a number of problems in the movement structure during the humanist and gynocentric attempts to build a universal sisterhood. All of these factors brought about the fragmentation of the second wave movement and need separate consideration.

### *The role of identity politics*

Although the movement was diverse in the second wave, it was initially successful. Identity politics - both humanist and gynocentric - allowed women to come together and mobilise in the name of their common experiences as women. But this very process depended on the asserted identity being stabilised and fixed as an unchanging mark of identification. David Miller has usefully characterised the logic of identity politics, writing:

For identity politics cannot be infinitely flexible. It must designate certain groups for political recognition, fix their membership, and determine what rights they are going to enjoy. In practice it relies on taking some characteristic such as gender or race...and using this as the basis for group classification.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> A. Ferguson, 'On Conceiving Motherhood and Sexuality: A Feminist Materialist Approach,' in D. Tietjens Meyers (ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, op.cit., p. 57.

<sup>100</sup> D. Miller, *Group identities, National Identities, and Democratic Politics*, a paper presented at the Morrell Conference on Toleration, Identity and Difference, (University of York: September 1995), p. 12.

Miller's most salient point, then, is that identity politics can only function by fixing the identity of those who participate in it. In the second wave this fixing of identity became essentialising, itself curtailing women's identity choices.

Hence, in the British and American second wave feminist movements, this sort of identity politics was not just a first step to establish solidarity, it was also woven into a quest for feminist authenticity that extended to women's lifestyle choices and which demanded ideological adherence. Many second wave humanist feminists, for example, Firestone and Friedan essentialised the human identity by depicting an 'authentic' human self. In turn, this concept essentialised women by default, suggesting that they were not men and in their difference were incomplete human selves. Gynocentric feminists, in contrast, essentialised women in terms of an inherent 'feminine' identity. The extreme gynocentrism of lesbian feminists took this identity politics still further and saw it as a demand for complete sexual authenticity. As Lovenduski and Randall put it, 'the reasoning behind the Radical feminist understanding of the politics of sexuality was that only lesbians could really be feminists because only lesbians chose other women sexually, only lesbians were truly women-centred'.<sup>101</sup>

Combined with the quest for authenticity, identity politics became essentialising and authoritarian. Women who were ill at ease with a particular portrayal of authentic feminism either withdrew from the movement or asserted their own purportedly authentic view of identity. Barbara Ryan, in her study of the second wave American movement, documents how this process took hold. She writes:

The adoption of an ideology that found only certain actors, lifestyles and relationships acceptable is closely related to social movement histories characterised by values of domination and control. None of these feminist groups [small radical, feminist groupings] were desirous of dictatorial authority, yet the emphasis on ideological purity lent itself to sometimes oppressive mind-sets.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain*, op.cit., p. 70-71.

<sup>102</sup> B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, op.cit., p. 61.



Moreover, as these mind-sets increased and the number of different groups grew, they began competing for autonomy, ideological conformity and, sometimes, funding.<sup>103</sup>

### *Universal sisterhood and representation*

This ideological infighting also undermined the search for sisterhood that marked out the early years of the movement. Initially the rhetoric of sisterhood, like identity politics in general, was an important tool for solidarity and representation. Basing the representativeness of the movement on sisterhood meant that any women could represent all women simply by evoking its name. On this analysis, to be a member of the sisterhood was to be all women, experiencing the same universal, patriarchal oppression. The irony is, of course, that sisterhood proved to be unrepresentative of many women. These women were not happy to be dismissed by the rhetoric of 'false consciousness' and some serious criticisms of sisterhood emerged.

Aside from the gynocentric criticisms addressed earlier, more strident concerns were voiced by black women who had been involved in the feminist movement and who found that, for all its diversity of theories, the movement focused only on the experiences of white women. bell hooks<sup>104</sup> and Audre Lourde<sup>105</sup> were crucial in asserting the black feminist critique. hooks, considered black women to suffer dual oppression. Firstly, they suffered oppression by a patriarchy in which the black male, even during slavery, had more power than the black female and, secondly, they suffered at the hands of a racist culture.<sup>106</sup> According to hooks, these two forms of oppression combined to place black women in a uniquely subordinate position. She believed that this position was perpetuated within the second wave movement and that black women found the attitudes of most white feminists to be covertly racist and

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<sup>103</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain*, op.cit., note that the Greater London Council in the early 1980s was funding feminist groups in the locality and that there was fierce competition for this funding, p. 73.

<sup>104</sup> b. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1982).

<sup>105</sup> A. Lourde, 'Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,' in M. Evans (ed.), *The Woman Question*, (2nd edition, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1994), pp. 36-41.

<sup>106</sup> b. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, op.cit., p. 6.

patronising.<sup>107</sup> hooks suggests that this feeling of alienation was compounded by the belief among black women, who were more likely to be poor than their white counterparts, that those leading the movement were not even oppressed to the same degree as them: tending to be white, middle class and educated.<sup>108</sup> At root, the black feminist critique is a powerful indication of the limitations of a movement that concentrated on questions of identity, and did so in a manner that tended towards ideological conformity.

The black feminist position was not the only critique of second wave feminism, two others emerged: lesbian feminism and poor women. Lesbian feminists were often the leaders of the more radical, small group sector and by the late 1970s they were having an even greater impact within the movement as a whole. They believed that the movement reified heterosexual relations and had ignored their concerns as lesbians. Hence, lesbian feminists, such as Adrienne Rich, introduced the idea of 'women-identified experience' to encourage women to stop wasting their energies on men and to seek friendship with other women who would nurture, not destroy, their selfhood.<sup>109</sup> In Britain lesbian feminists fought for the adoption of a seventh general movement aim to protect women from sexual coercion and male aggression in general and ward off, what they perceived to be, the negative effects of heterosexism.<sup>110</sup>

Poor women joined these dissenting voices. They were not satisfied that their demands were in the remit of the movement, despite the existence of many socialist feminist groups in the second wave.<sup>111</sup> In fact, socialist feminists were often paralysed

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>109</sup> A. Rich, 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,' op.cit., p. 178.

<sup>110</sup> The rest were largely liberal demands for better education and government provided childcare, although the more extreme statement, that male violence amounted to political control over women, was omitted, D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, op.cit., pp. 132-133.

<sup>111</sup> The latter constituted a very important sector in the movement in Britain. In terms of identity politics, socialist feminists had to reflect two identities: the gender identity and the class identity. They often ended up privileging class identity and were sceptical of extreme radical groups that were concerned only with gender identity, feeling that they lacked a theoretically rigorous view of human nature, A. Jagger, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, (Sussex and New Jersey: Harvester and Rowman and Allanfeld, 1983), p. 105.



by factionalism in their sector of the movement, as a result of dogmatic assertions of 'true' theory. For poor women, such theoretical infighting seemed irrelevant to their practical economic difficulties and they often felt alienated by it. Instead they chose to seek better representation in the trade unions and conduct their own battles. In Britain, women workers brought some of the first equal pay actions, without direct feminist involvement in their cause.<sup>112</sup>

The position of these critiques in this analysis is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, they exposed the dangers of the essentialist thinking that was present in much second wave humanist and gynocentric feminism. On the other hand, it is not clear that these theoretical challenges were themselves 'anti-essentialist.' Some of these theories, notoriously those of many radical lesbian feminists, were predicated on their own brand of essentialism, which proved to be just as inadequate as the ideas they criticised in determining what it meant to be a woman or an authentic feminist. Ultimately, they did not solve the representation problems of second wave feminism and the movement moved from fragmentation to disintegration as ideological warfare broke out.

The unrepresentative nature of the second wave movement was compounded by its prevailing model of participatory democracy.<sup>113</sup> In this model, the legitimating factor is not formal and institutional representation, but participation and agreement. Most feminist groups therefore did not have leaders or formal voting procedures. The groups wanted, instead, to be based on consensus decision-making, that reflected their common concerns as women. Anne Phillips has illustrated how the lack of formal procedures in the movement was very destructive because feminist groups either broke into smaller and smaller groups until they reached consensus or descended into

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<sup>112</sup> D. Bouchier *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, op.cit., pp. 106-108.

<sup>113</sup> It is actually very surprising how quickly leading feminists realised that this lack of formalism caused problems and yet it still continued. A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) p. 127, notes how Jo Freeman's tract, *The Structure of Structurelessness*, which detailed these problems, was being circulated in America as early as 1970.

protracted debating processes that continually deferred decisions.<sup>114</sup> Further, the lack of leaders, and this stands as one of Phillips's most useful points, led to accountability and legitimacy problems.<sup>115</sup> If there is no formal leadership, as was the case with many second wave groups, then nobody has the authority to speak for, or to represent anyone else. In the second wave, this situation was worsened by the propensity of the media to create movement leaders - often the most articulate and the loudest members of a group - which also caused resentment among those feminists not chosen.

Consequently, the following conclusions can be made about the historical patterns of first and second wave feminism. Movement unity has been the exception and not the general situation throughout the history of feminism. Where a unification of objectives has taken place, it has not been on the basis of grand, revolutionary schema, but because of more moderate single-issue campaigns. Hence, there was convergence in the first wave, to good effect, over the need for citizenship and the vote for women. In the second wave there was some banding together in America to get the constitutional Equal Rights Amendment passed and to gain abortion rights.<sup>116</sup> In Britain, the second wave movement found similar strength in defending the 1967 abortion law from the several legislative attempts to restrict or abolish it that were made in the late 1970s.<sup>117</sup> Beyond these instances, it is hard to find much hard evidence of a sisterhood, other than as a vague symbol of solidarity.

### *Movement meltdown: the end of feminist politics?*

Undoubtedly not all feminism organisations and groups in the second wave ended up in such disarray. Organisations such as NOW maintained a formal membership structure and, at its height, had a quarter of a million members.<sup>118</sup> But these groups are

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<sup>114</sup> See A. Phillips, Chapter Five, 'The Paradoxes of Participation,' *ibid.*, pp. 120-146, for a general discussion of the movement's problems with democracy.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>116</sup> B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, *op.cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>117</sup> D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, *op.cit.*, p. 113

<sup>118</sup> B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, *op.cit.*, p. 73.



not those that the press continue to portray in a negative manner. Moreover, the legacy of radical groups has been greater than that of conventional organisations, with many feminists of the last decade, such as Iris Marion Young, celebrating their grassroots structure and practise of 'cultural politics'.<sup>119</sup> Thus, it seems imperative to reassess these groupings, just as much as the larger organisations, when providing a retrospective of the second wave movement.

It was in smaller, more radical groups that second wave feminism's concern with personal identity became more pronounced. They used 'consciousness raising' to concentrate on the personal identities and experiences of women. Many feminists had initially hoped that such a procedure would counteract the patriarchally imposed 'false consciousness' of women, enabling them, instead, to become aware of their own personal oppression.<sup>120</sup> The actual process was done in a group setting so that the shared nature of these experiences of oppression could become apparent, or so went the theory. In reality it often ended up as private therapy, having limited political affect beyond the group. Juliet Mitchell was one of the first feminists to note the fragmentary impact of group 'consciousness raising', observing that, 'some...have suffered the fate of the whirlpool. Individual - small group - individual. Lonely women have left the home and gone back home'.<sup>121</sup> In America some women began 'trashing' women during 'consciousness raising', whereby in the name of ideological purity and authentic identity, but often for personal reasons, they excluded women from their feminist group. Ti-Grace Atkinson was even excluded from The Feminists, the group she helped found.<sup>122</sup> In Britain there was a similar degree of factionalism and infighting, with a national body for feminist activity, the Women's National Co-

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<sup>119</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 154.

<sup>120</sup> J. Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, (London: Penguin, 1971) p. 61.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>122</sup> B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, *op.cit.*, p. 62.

ordinating Committee, being abolished in 1971 because of movement splits, only a year after its establishment.<sup>123</sup>

By the mid-1980s this factionalism had given way to the disintegration of the movement. Some feminists were working in highly structured pressure organisations in the political system and most of the radical sector was involved in small-scale, cultural measures.<sup>124</sup> The whole ethos of 'the personal is political' turned in on itself and started to re-marginalise feminists in regard to politics. Diane Fuss succinctly depicts the retreat from politics brought about by identity politics, stating 'a severe reduction of the political to the personal leads to a telescoping of goals, a limiting of revolutionary activity to the project of self-discovery and personal transformation'.<sup>125</sup>

Identity politics thus signalled movement meltdown in the second wave. David Bouchier even noted, in a rather bleak summary of the movement, that 'as a movement, it is virtually a textbook case of every problem which has plagued every social movement in history'.<sup>126</sup> Ultimately, the central difficulty remained the widespread tendency towards identity politics that saw many feminists seek out illusory ideas of 'authentic' feminist experiences. It proved to be very hard to find theoretical agreement over these visions. Hence, the movement fragmented into a mass of feminist groups, each of which had a different idea of authenticity. Identity politics also narrowed the appeal of feminism because many women did not recognise themselves in these pictures of women's experiences. Thus, most feminists, by the late 1980s, found themselves in a marginalised position. They were left with a rump movement and, as Susan Mendus has noted, they were disillusioned with democracy.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, op.cit., p. 94.

<sup>124</sup> These measures continued to be important in providing safe spaces for women, but they tended to be insular and fragmented and did not help the wider movement politically engage.

<sup>125</sup> D. Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 101.

<sup>126</sup> D. Bouchier, *The Feminist Challenge: The Movement for Women's Liberation in Britain and the USA*, op.cit., p. 208.

<sup>127</sup> See her article on the implications of this feminist disillusionment with democracy, S. Mendus, 'Losing the Faith: Feminism and Democracy,' in J. Dunn, (ed.), *Democracy the Unfinished Journey: 508 BC to AD 1993*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 207-219.



## Conclusion

Feminists began writing during the Enlightenment and were inspired into greater activism by the revolutionary fervour of eighteenth century Europe. In the first wave the need to gain basic legal and civil rights meant that the movement was fairly unified. Although first wave feminists certainly raised questions of identity, it was the need for civil and legal recognition that remained important for both humanist and gynocentric feminists at that time. Most first wave humanist feminists, such as Mill and Stanton, believed that this sort of recognition would liberate women from their traditional dependence on men. For gynocentric feminists, such as Power Cobbe, civil recognition meant the positive and equal acceptance of women's distinctive values.

Second wave feminist theorising, on the other hand, turned its attention to issues of identity to account for why, after attaining the most basic civil, political and social rights, women still appeared to be socially subordinate to men. The first feminist response was humanistic, with Woolf, de Beauvoir and Friedan arguing that women were suffering as human beings by their failure to take up educational and legal opportunities. Moreover, the very fact that women had not advanced meant that a more intensive analysis of their social and psychological position was deemed necessary. In Woolf's work this search culminated in the suggestion that there was a socially constructed and maintained coalition of values that women found inherently alienating. This argument was the start of the new definition of patriarchy. Although many feminists went on to develop this idea of women having intrinsically different identities to men into gynocentric feminist positions, others, such as Friedan and de Beauvoir, reasserted humanist feminism. In general, though, this period saw a transition to identity politics that came to define the second wave.

In the second wave identity politics proved to be the common link between the gynocentrists and the humanists and in most cases the question of identity was fixed; it thus provided essentialised versions of what women were or should be and what it meant to be an 'authentic' feminist. Second wave humanist feminists believed

therefore that women needed to search for autonomous human identity because they had been excluded from authentic human selfhood. Gynocentric feminists, Ruddick and Elshtain are good examples, believed, in contrast, that women have distinctive feminine identities that were equal, if not superior, to men's. Thus, they set out to defend and nurture the women's point of view. While this objective was a moderate project of political inclusion for Elshtain, for a radical feminist like Rich it meant that women's identity could only be protected in a separate political sphere.

Identity politics took practical effect in the movement in a very distinctive manner. In the face of ideologically defined identities, all flexibility to appeal to women who fell beyond these rigid distinctions was lost. Indeed, many second wave feminists had difficulty accepting the diversity of women's voices and the dissent that arose; after all, they were propagating visions of authenticity. At its worst, identity politics culminated in feminists personally attacking each other's lifestyle choices and excluding women who didn't 'fit.' Moreover, the propensity to favour non-traditional and informal political ties meant that such infighting could not be legitimately processed by appeal to a leader or procedural rules; this often led to fragmentation into still smaller groupings where unanimity and consensus on identity and lifestyle could be achieved. Unfortunately, some women were compelled to withdraw altogether from feminist politics. On the rare occasions there was a convergence of objectives in the movement, it was never the result of a unified feminist theory or of a widespread solidarity among women. Rather, feminists converged on single issues such as abortion policy, and later the anti-missile campaign. In these instances a base unity of objectives could be retained, even if disagreement over strategies and tactics existed.

Since the late 1980s, two responses to the disintegration of the feminist movement have arisen. One response has been to continue the search for a feminist sisterhood and a single feminist theory. The other response, to which this thesis is sympathetic, has been to re-evaluate the utopianism, essentialism and universalism of the second wave and rethink questions of feminist collectivity and movement politics. It is a big step however to forsake the universal solidarity promised by the sisterhood.



Indeed, many feminists are convinced that without a sisterhood - or, more properly, the promise of a sisterhood - there cannot be an effective feminist movement. Consequently, the disintegration of second wave feminism needs to be better understood before these theoretical steps can be widely accepted. Hence, while this chapter has concentrated on the internal problems of feminism, the disintegration of the second wave movement can be usefully seen in a wider context. On this basis, feminists share the general dilemmas facing many radical activist movements in complex Western democracies: how to overcome disintegration and how to respond to increasingly pluralised political, social and cultural climates?

The intellectual terms of this debate have found their clearest manifestation in the body of thought termed postmodernism. The disparate band of thinkers making up postmodernism includes Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. Their theories stand behind an important shift in feminist political theory, to be examined in the next chapter, and have been used by many feminists to understand the fragmentation of the second wave. Seyla Benhabib, Iris Young and Chantal Mouffe are three feminists who have taken postmodern discourses seriously, using them to question the second wave's emphasis on essential identity, utopian political settlements and feminist theories of knowledge that all proved to be so devastating for the movement. Moreover, these thinkers realise that feminism is now a permanently contested and complex concept. They are all keen, therefore, to re-engage feminist concerns with a wider political framework of democratic politics and ensure that feminist concerns are not left marginalised, as they have been since the fragmentation of the second wave.

## Chapter Two. Understanding the Relationship between Feminism and Postmodernism

### Introduction

It was shown in the last chapter that the second wave feminist movement fragmented by the late 1980s for three reasons. Firstly, the feminist emphasis on identity politics left them fighting bitter battles over authenticity. Secondly, their search for a universal sisterhood based on shared identity and common experiences excluded and misrepresented many women. Thirdly, as the movement began to fragment, many feminist groups withdrew from political engagement, often concentrating on utopian, separatist political settlements. Feminists have spent the last twenty years coming to terms with this fragmentation. Some feminists, such as Barbara Ryan, have continued to argue for a second wave model of feminism based on a sisterhood, ensuring that this time it is properly 'inclusive'.<sup>1</sup> However, a large number of feminist theorists have begun to rethink feminism and its fragmentation in terms of postmodern discourses.<sup>2</sup> While this approach rarely amounts to 'postmodern-feminism,' it indicates how postmodernism has provided a critical impetus to re-examine the problems of feminist fragmentation and to move feminism into a new wave. It is necessary therefore to examine the role postmodern theory has played in shifting feminism into this new wave of thinking and in helping it to come to terms with the legacies of the second wave. However, postmodernism itself is not a coherent body of thought, it includes diverse thinkers and themes. Therefore, before the relationship between feminism and postmodernism can be fully understood, it is necessary to define postmodernism by

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<sup>1</sup> B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> For useful introductions to the feminist thinking after the postmodern critique see J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York and London: Routledge: 1990), N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,' in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 5, Nos. 2-3, (June 1988), and C. Mouffe, 'Feminism, Citizenship and Politics,' in *The Return of the Political*, (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp. 74-89.



considering its roots in modern traditions of thought and delimiting its political implications.

Hence, the aim of this chapter is to study contemporary approaches to postmodern thought. From this study it is possible to place postmodernism in a diverse historical tradition, before addressing current postmodern theories and their implications for feminist politics. The chapter will conclude with a consideration of the role postmodern thinking plays in a new wave of feminist political thought, including the problems and opportunities created by this paradigm change. It will argue that postmodernism has been used as a critical strategy that allows feminists to understand the fragmentation of the second wave, question their essentialist views of subjectivity and re-think their reliance on utopian and separatist political settlements. On these terms, postmodernism is a critical strategy that, once applied to the feminist example, indicates a twofold process. On the one hand, feminists can use it to rethink the feminist movement as an alliance or coalition rather than a sisterhood. In the alliance the aim of feminism is to create political strategies for feminists, not to search for identity affirmation. On the other hand, the postmodern approach calls for feminists to recognise the limits of their activist politics and the precarious nature of their solidarity. Consequently if feminists understand the postmodern position, they will also place feminism in a wider political framework, ensuring that women's citizen identity is protected, as well as their feminist one. Hence, it will be seen that postmodern theory finally breaks with the separatist position in feminism and reconciles feminism with political engagement.

### **Approaching postmodern theories**

Postmodernism, at least in its current guise, has emerged over the past thirty years. It is a controversial theory that has met with many responses including outright rejection. In the early 1980s Jurgen Habermas made his famous condemnation of

postmodernism, vilifying it as conservative, apolitical and nihilistic.<sup>3</sup> However, Habermas's own approach to postmodernism was not without its difficulties. It tended to simplify the historical tradition of modernity and it dismissed all theories of postmodernism as variants of conservatism, missing the subtleties of the discourse. A more fruitful approach to postmodernism is to understand it as a diverse body of thought. So while some thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Braudillard have offered up concrete, alternative postmodern political discourses,<sup>4</sup> others, such as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Richard Rorty, have used it as a project for 'coming to terms' with modernity.<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Cahoon, who has offered one of the most cogent categorisations of postmodern thought, detects three forms of postmodern thinking to take account of its diversity. He suggests that each postmodern thinker must be examined to determine whether they are,

(a) merely making the historical claim that modern ideas and methods are being superseded or abandoned in the present age; (b) questioning the validity of modern methods without making any explicit claims about their falsity or suggesting that they be abandoned; or (c) claiming the inadequacy of modern methods and inviting us to abandon them in favour of something else.<sup>6</sup>

It is the second postmodern approach that is most useful for feminist purposes. It is concerned with finding the limits of modern intellectual and political thought and constitutes what is best described as a critical strategy, rather than a nihilistic attempt to destroy all forms of theory and knowledge. Postmodernism, seen as a critical strategy, questions the present validity of modern ideas and methods of thought to establish their contingent usefulness for political thinking. This strategy makes no claims about

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<sup>3</sup> J. Habermas, 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project,' in H. Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, (London: Pluto Press, 1985), p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans., G. Bennington and B. Massumi, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) and J. Braudillard, from, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death,' in L. Cahoon (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 437-460.

<sup>5</sup> See, M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in M. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, P. Rabinow (ed.), (New York: Pantheon, 1984), R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and J. Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, T. Moi, (ed.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> L. Cahoon in L. Cahoon (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, op.cit., p. 18.



either the historical accuracy or necessity of these forms of thought. Indeed, part of the critical strategy might be to acknowledge a debt to the modern political tradition.

Hence, the strand of postmodern thought that will be argued for here questions the contingent validity of the assumptions of universalistic, essentialistic and foundationalist thought that have underpinned Enlightenment philosophy and many modern activist movements, such as second wave feminism. It looks at how the theory and practice of these ideals, particularly by radical, activist movements, has pluralised and problematised them. Approaching postmodern thought in this manner, moreover, gives the discourse some historical depth, which helps explain its role in and relationship to a new wave of feminist thinking.

### **The historical tradition of postmodern thought**

It is necessary to place postmodernism in its own historical tradition so that its contingent basis in modern thought can be understood. It also helps in establishing postmodern discourse as a critical strategy, which is constructive not nihilistic. In short, examining this tradition shows how modern and postmodern discourses mesh together and are dependent on each other. As Foucault writes, finding postmodernism's place in the modern tradition will not be a case of,

seeking to distinguish the 'modern era' from the 'premodern' or 'postmodern' ... it would be more useful to try and find out how the attitude of modernity ever since its formation, has found itself struggling with the attitudes of 'countermodernity.'<sup>7</sup>

For Foucault, therefore, postmodernism becomes an 'ethos,' a perspective on ways of thinking, that not everyone will share.<sup>8</sup> It does not signify a completely new philosophical age or method. Part of this approach to postmodernism is the recognition that modernity is not itself a singular tradition, but actually consists of a number of theoretical debates. Hence, this view of postmodernism as a 'critical strategy' has direct historical roots in three areas of modern thought: the debates of the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment, the rise of romanticism, and early

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<sup>7</sup> M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' op.cit p. 39.

twentieth century thinking on the modern condition. While the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment and the rise of Romanticism will be discussed below, early twentieth century thinking on the modern condition will be considered at a later point. These areas of thought set precedents for the postmodern questioning of universalism, rational selfhood and foundational philosophy, and thus each shall be examined in turn.

### *Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment debates*

Enlightenment philosophy has been a definitive part of the Western tradition of political thought. It was seen in Chapter One that this thought established the concepts of the rational, autonomous human self, radical political agency, and universal, objective knowledge. Indeed, these concepts inspired the democratic revolutions of Europe, first wave feminist movements and nineteenth century liberal views of politics. Charles Taylor indicates the importance of the Enlightenment and, more specifically, Kantian views of the self in theorising the subject as an active social and political agent. According to Taylor, these views of selfhood were predicated on universal standards of action that meant the self was autonomous and active, but still had to fulfil certain duties and obligations.<sup>9</sup>

However, no concept can remain tied to the tradition of thought that first produced it. Thus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Enlightenment view of the rational autonomous self, that used reason to found knowledge and realise its duties, was interpreted in many different ways. Initially for thinkers such as Descartes and Kant reason was seen as a form of philosophical critique that could be used to critically analyse knowledge-claims and to formulate first principles. However, for later thinkers it became clear that reason, once portrayed as a philosophical critique, could be used to question the ultimate truths and philosophic laws they had initially set

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

<sup>9</sup> C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 84.



out to theorise.<sup>10</sup> With this established, the idea of the reasoning self who founds knowledge passes from Enlightenment discourse to counter-Enlightenment discourses. John Gray notes how Nietzsche developed a counter-Enlightenment discourse that brought to fruition the Enlightenment themes of the rational, autonomous self and the use of critical reason. As Gray writes, 'Nietzsche's thought accomplishes the dissolution of the Enlightenment project, because in it the apotheosis of human subjectivity is combined with a subversive critical reason and only the will-to-power remains'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the idea of the autonomous selfhood using reason to establish universal laws, gives way to the subject using reason to question all laws, limits and obligations, leaving only its individual will.<sup>12</sup> The new ways of thinking that emerged in the Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries find echoes in contemporary postmodern thought. The most crucial legacy is the concept of critical reason that Nietzsche began to evaluate in contrast to the Enlightenment meaning of thought as a tool to find universal laws and knowledge. In his thought, reason no longer sought out universal philosophical truths, but was used to question the idea of truth itself.<sup>13</sup> This counter-Enlightenment view of critical reason finds postmodern expression in the discourse's questioning of philosophical essences, origins and foundations. The postmodern thinker Foucault argues that the use of critical reason in this manner does not replicate Enlightenment or counter-enlightenment thinking, but invokes the contingency of our philosophical tools on these traditions:

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<sup>10</sup> Kant was one of the first thinkers to question the idea of singular and essential origins. According to Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). pp. 31-32, Kant doubts the possibility of ever knowing an a priori, ready-made-world. Instead, Kant saw it as a product of human knowing and judgement, such that, there is no essential origin or cause, because then one would always have to find the origin of the origin, *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>11</sup> J. Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) pp. 165-166.

<sup>12</sup> We saw in Chapter One how the Kantian self was prevented from pure self-assertion by its duties and obligations that were governed by universal laws. If autonomous selfhood is separated from these universal laws, as Nietzsche effectively did by questioning universalism, all that is left is self-assertion.

The thread that may connect us with the Enlightenment is not a faithfulness to doctrinal elements but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude - that is of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era.<sup>14</sup>

The problem, according to Foucault, has been the tendency to see this ethos as modernity per se, as constitutive of an historical epoch. He suggests, instead, that it is a philosophical attitude that a few, now and then, continue to hold. In this sense, postmodern philosophy, if Foucault's theory is applied, is indebted to Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment views of critique, and the tensions between them. However, the real challenge to Enlightenment thought emanated from nineteenth century Romanticism.

### *The rise of Romanticism*

The rudiments of the Romantic alternative to Enlightenment theories, based on rationalism, universalism and foundationalism, developed over a hundred years. It was not the first discourse to oppose Enlightenment views of the centrality of reason in constituting the self and knowledge. In the same century that this view of rationality was being established, some thinkers simultaneously accepted the importance of sentiments and emotion.<sup>15</sup> Isaiah Berlin believes that the early Romantics followed this trajectory of thought, believing that the human will needed both reason and creativity for self-expression.<sup>16</sup> So in many respects, Romantic thinkers tried to theorise a richer concept of reason than that which was commonly held in the Enlightenment, to take account of all aspects of human existence.<sup>17</sup> For example, Herder rejected the Enlightenment's rather stolid picture of the autonomous, rational human self, arguing,

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed Foucault examines the full implications of Nietzsche's genealogy for modern philosophical methods in M. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in L. Cahoone (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, op.cit., pp. 360-378.

<sup>14</sup> M. Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' op.cit., p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity*, op.cit., pp. 343-347, notes that both Hume and Diderot were challenging the predominant views of reason in this period.

<sup>16</sup> I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, H. Hardy (ed.), (London: John Murray, 1990), pp. 214-215.

<sup>17</sup> N. O'Sullivan, *Conservatism*, (London: J. M. Dent and Son, 1976), says that this new concept of reason was intended to 'do justice to the diversity and complexity of the universe, the social order and human nature itself,' p. 70.



philosophers have exalted human reason to a position of supremacy, independent of senses and organs. But just as there is no such thing as an isolated faculty of reason, so there is no man who has become all he is entirely by his own effort.<sup>18</sup>

By questioning the supremacy of reason, Herder showed that the human self was a social being located within the world, and that even the use of reason was determined by social existence. Hence, while it is clear that many Romantics did not oppose rationality, they did give theoretical depth to the idea of the self who is primarily emotional and social.

Most Romantic thinkers agreed with the idea of the social self, but they developed both conservative and radical responses to it. In nineteenth century Germany a strong *conservative* Romantic Movement emerged, writing in the nationalist spirit of the then nascent German unification. German conservative Romantic thinkers tended to emphasise the values of nation and social unity.<sup>19</sup> French Romantics, such as Charles Baudelaire, were often more radical and individualist than their German counterparts.<sup>20</sup> In general, however, most Romantics felt that questions of identity were more complex than many Enlightenment thinkers had imagined. Romantic thinkers wanted to acknowledge the social differences between individuals, differences that could not be levelled by the exercise of universal reason. Baudelaire summed up this diversity, stating, 'within that unity which we call a Nation (*sic*), the various professions and classes and the passing centuries all introduce variety'.<sup>21</sup>

The nineteenth century Romantic belief in difference and diversity encompassed more than their view of human nature. They also questioned the Enlightenment belief in the possibility of universal solutions to moral and political problems. As Arthur Lovejoy argues, in *The Great Chain of Being*, Romantic thinkers

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<sup>18</sup> J. Herder, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, F. Barnard, (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> See the chapter, 'The German Conservative Tradition: Romanticism and Power', in N. O'Sullivan, *Conservatism*, op.cit., pp. 58-81, for a useful overview of this period.

<sup>20</sup> C. Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life,' in L. Cahoone (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, op.cit., pp. 136-144.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

resisted Enlightenment attempts to standardise thought into a set of universal truths.<sup>22</sup> Rather, they acknowledged the contingency and diversity of moral and political ideas. The nineteenth century German Romantic Trietschke, for instance, noted how ‘the concept of sovereignty can be no rigid one; it is elastic and relative like all political conceptions’.<sup>23</sup> In reifying difference and contingency, Romantics had a clear grasp of the possibility of social conflict arising.<sup>24</sup> Many radical Romantic thinkers even saw this conflict as an inherent good in society and the cosmos. Baudelaire, for example, characterised his ‘dandy’ philosophy as a search for ‘modernity’ based on such notions of ‘the ephemeral, the fugitive and the contingent’.<sup>25</sup>

The Romantic challenge to Enlightenment thought thus established new concepts of the self, society and philosophy. They countered the Enlightenment view of the objective, rational self with the aesthetic, impassioned and creative one. They also rejected the view of a rationally ordered universe, recognising, instead, the plurality of values and societies. Finally, most Romantics recognised the historical and social contingency of thought and meaning. This view of philosophy contrasted with the predominant Enlightenment belief in the progressive, rational and universalisable development of human thought and knowledge.

These nineteenth century Romantic views of contingency, diversity and complexity have distinctive echoes in contemporary postmodern views of the decentred self and the plurality of society and discourse. The postmodern tendency to conceive of the self as decentred links to the radical Romantic view of the self as expressive and complex. In both cases the rejection of the universalisable core self has led to, and has been developed from, a view of extreme diversity among individuals in a fluctuating and complex society. Second, both Romantic, as Trietschke’s work showed, and postmodern thinkers stress the contingency of philosophical thought and

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<sup>22</sup> A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 292-293.

<sup>23</sup> H. von Trietschke, *A Selection from Trietschke’s Lectures on Politics*, Trans., Adam. L. Gowans, (London and Glasgow: Gowans and Gray Ltd, 1914), pp. 14.

<sup>24</sup> A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, op.cit., p. 296.

<sup>25</sup> C. Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ op.cit., p. 142.



concepts, questioning their status as universal truths. These postmodern concepts will be examined in more detail at a later stage, but the connection can be established.

However, there are limits to how far the parallels between Romantic and postmodern thought can be taken. Most Romantics see society as a diverse but, ultimately, functioning, organic whole.<sup>26</sup> Many postmoderns, for example, Laclau and Mouffe, would dispute such a harmonious view of society, believing, instead, that society is irrevocably contradictory and fragmented.<sup>27</sup> The second difference between Romantic and postmodern discourses stems from the Romantic idea that the subject's inner nature and outer nature can be reconciled. Romantics see the attainment of this unification as a source of freedom. As Noël O'Sullivan puts it, 'the Romantic conservative, in short, wants so much unity that nothing but the world of pure spirit...will satisfy him'.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, postmoderns such as Julia Kristeva reject both the possibility and the desirability of the *permanently* reconciled and united self. Given these differences between Romantic and postmodern views of the self, it is necessary to look at how Romanticism developed in early twentieth century thought, to fully understand the historical circumstances of contemporary postmodern theory.

### **Making sense of the twentieth century: new modes of thought and new political problems**

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Enlightenment and Romantic doctrines had gone through several permutations. They were further developed by the ideological divides of the early twentieth century in which new forms of thought emerged responding to the industrialisation and scientification of society, totalitarian political ideology, and the growing diversity and complexity of Western societies. What characterises much early twentieth century thought - and directly streams into contemporary postmodern themes - is the idea that philosophy should reflect and respond to the crises of society;

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<sup>26</sup> N. O'Sullivan, *Conservatism*, op.cit., p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London and New York: Verso, 1985) p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> N. O'Sullivan, *Conservatism*, op.cit., p. 69.

that is to say, philosophy should have the task of literally *making sense* of the twentieth century. Hence, new ideas again emerged about the self, society, philosophy and knowledge.

### *The twentieth century self*

As it has been argued, Romantic thinkers challenged the vision of the rational, autonomous unified self, first theorised by Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes and Kant. They suggested that the self was not purely rational but also wanted to be creative, passionate and authentic. They tended to believe that by living this authentic existence the self could be unified. It took the Freudian philosophy of the self to further question both Enlightenment and Romantic visions of unified subjectivity. Put briefly, Freud believed that the self had three constituent parts: the id, ego and superego. The id, the unconscious part of the self, was complex, passionate and often irrational, making self-unification difficult. Thus while Freud believed that the self, the ego, could be rationally ordered through the superego's acceptance of social rules, laws and norms, this ordering could only happen through the repression of the chaotic id. Hence, the self (ego) was always caught between the impulses of its id and the need to control its id because of social constraints, and it could never find authenticity as Romantic thinkers believed. The result was, rather, tremendous guilt and often a feeling of extreme unease at the need for repression.<sup>29</sup>

From the 1930s onwards, Jacques Lacan<sup>30</sup> further developed the psychoanalytic view of the self. His views will be examined in greater detail later but, for the moment, it can be noted that, like Freud, he believed the self was complex. Its complexity lay in the fact that it must make itself known to others through the use of

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<sup>29</sup> S. Freud, 'Civilisation and its Discontents,' in L. Cahoon (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, op.cit., p. 215. If this unease was very severe, such that repression was difficult to achieve, then the patient needed psychoanalysis. Even then, therapy only aims at getting the patient to accept the necessary repression of their id.

<sup>30</sup> J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Trans., Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 1977).



language.<sup>31</sup> However, he rejected the Freudian idea that the self could order and regulate itself. According to Lacan, the self had no core unity and the self was beset by a feeling of lack because it could not live up to the social desire for complete unity. The self would thus remain decentred. The Frankfurt School of critical theorists, which included Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer, also picked up the psychoanalytic view of the self. They used the theory to supplement Marxist theories of revolution and suggested that modern man was disunified and in crisis, facing alienation from his very being.<sup>32</sup> According to their argument, modern man thus needed liberation through social revolution, not more repression as Freud had suggested. These views of the self are important as a background to the postmodernism rendering of the decentred and complex self. But there is a point of contrast between these positions in that postmoderns believe that the complexity of the self is *inevitable*, it can never be unified by revolution, as the Frankfurt School argued, or by therapy, as Freud suggested.

#### *The social order in the twentieth century*

Just as psychoanalyst thinkers developed a more complex view of the self, other thinkers were questioning Enlightenment and Romantic views of society. Enlightenment thinkers, such as de Condorcet and Kant, believed that society was progressive and rationally ordered. As knowledge developed, they argued, society progressed a stage further towards perfect human existence. Romantics also developed a view of perfect, unified society. However, they believed in an evolutionary and organic, or an aesthetically created, society rather than a linear, progressive one. In the early twentieth century structuralists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, and phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and

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<sup>31</sup> For a good introduction to the relationship between Lacan and Freud's thinking see, chapter four of *Écrits*, *ibid.*, 'The Freudian Thing,' pp. 114-145.

<sup>32</sup> See H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Societies*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), and M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans., John Cumming, (London: Allen Lane, 1973).

Jean-Paul Sartre challenged these views of the unified society.<sup>33</sup> These thinkers questioned the idea of a single social discourse that could provide universal and transcendental meaning to existence. Instead they argued that there were a number of competing languages and social meanings in society. Diverse discourses thus found their meaning in the contingent social circumstances in which they arose: just as for Saussure, a word was only meaningful in its structural position in a sentence.<sup>34</sup> From these theories the following ideas developed: society was diverse, languages were contingent on society, and meaning was harder to objectify and universalise than was previously thought to be the case. However, these thinkers never denied the possibility of finding meaning; rather, they argued for new and better philosophical systems to discover it. Postmodern thinkers, by contrast, question even the assurance that new theory, new philosophy, can find meaning. Indeed, postmoderns doubt whether it is possible to create new philosophical systems of knowledge without some reference to existing traditions of thought.

### *Philosophy and knowledge: finding meaning in the twentieth century*

The questioning of the self, society, language, and meaning that took place in the early twentieth century was reflected in a wider re-evaluation of Western philosophical traditions. These traditions faced two types of criticism. One, that they were founded on a now defunct metaphysical and rationalistic basis and, two, that they were logically valid, but had led to a diminished and impoverished human existence. Thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger voiced the first, more wide-reaching, form of criticism.<sup>35</sup> They believed that the whole Western tradition of metaphysical humanism had failed.

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<sup>33</sup> See F. de Saussure from, 'Course in General Linguistics,' pp. 177-184, E. Husserl, from, 'The Crisis in European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology', pp. 226-242, and L. Wittgenstein, 'Lecture on Ethics,' pp. 191-198 all in L. Cahoon (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, op.cit. For Sartre, see, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans., H. E. Barnes, (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1958).

<sup>34</sup> F. de Saussure, from, 'Course in General Linguistics,' op.cit., p. 182.

<sup>35</sup> See any of Nietzsche's works but in particular, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Trans., Carol Diethe, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, Trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (London: Penguin, 1990). M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (Oxford and Cambridge (USA): Blackwell, 1962).



It had not uncovered 'Truth', as it purported to do, but had led to philosophical distortion and increasing disillusionment. Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* meticulously detailed this disillusion.<sup>36</sup> In this work he uses the genealogical method to consider the shifts and changes that have taken place in Western thought, and he objects to the Enlightenment idea that thought is a historically progressive, improvement of values.<sup>37</sup> He therefore sees history as a set of random events as opposed to the progressive uncovering of justice:

the whole history of a 'thing', an organ, a tradition can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations, the causes of which need not be connected even among themselves, but rather just follow and replace one another at random. The 'development' of a thing, a tradition, an organ is therefore certainly not its *progressus* towards a goal (his italics).<sup>38</sup>

Nietzsche concludes that his disillusion with the metaphysical tradition of humanism was a positive development, allowing the West to mature and realise its lack of progressive values. Heidegger, who also questioned the humanist tradition, retreated into a more romantic and mystical desire for a 'homeland' where meaning could be refound.<sup>39</sup>

The second critique of the Western tradition was directed at its reliance on scientific values. These values were seen by Max Weber to strip meaning from man's existence. He saw these processes culminating in 'disenchantment' and the loss of meaning from the world.<sup>40</sup> This critique found further development in Adorno and Horkheimer's work *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Unlike Nietzsche who remained thoroughly anti-humanistic, these thinkers conceived of their thought as an attempt to provide meaning for the world again in the face of secularism, scientism and

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<sup>36</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, op.cit.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *ibid.*, pp. 51-54, does not see humanistic progression, as the Enlightenment tradition would have it, but a more random process of change brought about by revenge, resentment and the desire for power.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> M. Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism,' op.cit., p. 291.

<sup>40</sup> L. Cahoon, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, op.cit., p. 157.

industrialisation.<sup>41</sup> While postmodernism is part of this general tradition of thought that questions modern humanist philosophy', it tends to align more with Nietzsche's rejection of truthful meaning than Weber, Horkheimer and Adorno's accounts.

Consequently, in the early twentieth century a number of themes have developed that are influential in contemporary postmodern thought. The complex and fragmented view of the self propagated by Freud and Lacan influenced the postmodern view of the decentred and anti-essential self. Saussure's and Wittgenstein's questioning of unified social knowledge and discourse has led postmoderns to consider the radical contingency of social discourse and events. Furthermore, the crisis in philosophy, theorised by Nietzsche and Weber at the turn of the twentieth century, set precedents for postmoderns to radically question the idea of foundationalist thought and the possibility of philosophical transcendence. These themes will be examined fully in the next section. However, some differences between postmodernism and its recent historical tradition must be considered.

Most of the twentieth century thinkers examined here questioned both Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy, but still held out the hope that they could re-value or restate the basic premises of Western thought. Even Nietzsche believed that he could transform the current state of knowledge. Rorty has recognised this situation and argues that Nietzsche and Heidegger replicated a sort of metaphysician's 'trap',<sup>42</sup> they both despised, by presenting their own theories as the final stage of the Western tradition. For Rorty these thinkers face a trap because they continue to desire utopian finality, even when they have criticised other forms of thought for the same desire. To avoid this mistake, he believes that postmodern thinkers should embrace the radical contingency of existence and always bear in mind the question, "who is going to

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<sup>41</sup> M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, op.cit., p.30, suggest that scientific positivism and mathematical thinking is the final attempt by the Enlightenment to secure itself against myths and magic.

<sup>42</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op.cit., p. 104.



redescribe me?”<sup>43</sup> So how do postmoderns escape this theoretical ‘trap’ and recognise their contingency?

The answer is to be found in postmodernism’s roots in twentieth century material political events and circumstances. The first event was the twentieth century experience of totalitarianism and, the second, the last gasp of radical movement politics in the late 1960s and 1970s. It is with some irony that contemporary postmodern theory appears to have been given definition by two concrete events because postmodernism, with its emphasis on text, discourse and language, is often written off as the ‘modern name for idealism’.<sup>44</sup> Surprising though it may be, thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard and Kristeva first started writing in the twenty years after the Nazi totalitarian regime ended. Like many theorists, they were keen to understand how such monolithic thinking had come to dominance. In an echo of Nietzsche, they questioned how such a ‘progressive’ and benevolent tradition could have produced such domination.<sup>45</sup>

However, in the 1960s and 1970s these thinkers still tended to hold on to the hope that radical revolutionary movements and new ways of thinking could rescue the humanist tradition from the road to domination. Lyotard, for example, tried to reformulate Marxism and Foucault supported radical activist movements.<sup>46</sup> It was the failure of these movements that eventually prompted many postmoderns to abandon their dreams of radical, utopian politics.<sup>47</sup> They began to write without the promise of utopian political settlements or philosophical transcendence and felt themselves limited by the contingent conditions of their existence. Indeed, this process has been replicated with the end of activist feminist politics, with thinkers such as Linda

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>44</sup> E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 66.

<sup>45</sup> See for example, M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Penguin, 1977) in which he documents how the decline in punitive punishment cannot be justified in terms of ‘humanity’ given that new, less explicit, but equally punitive, forms of punishment have emerged.

<sup>46</sup> J. Simons, *Foucault and the Political*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 10.

<sup>47</sup> J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 66, writes that the experiences of the 1970s radical movements showed there were no feasible political alternatives. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, op.cit., p. 386, also suggests that Marxism did not have the answers.

Nicholson and Nancy Fraser using postmodern discourses to account for the fragmentation of the movement<sup>48</sup> and recognise the contingency and limits of feminist thought. It is this political view of postmodernism that deserves consideration and is useful for understanding feminism after fragmentation. It conceives postmodernism as a critical strategy for fragmented radical activist movements, asking necessary questions about selfhood and subjectivity, society, philosophy, and knowledge to understand their demise.

### **Postmodern theories of the self, society and knowledge**

Attempts to define postmodern discourses are notoriously hard because of the diverse nature of the discourse and the unease some postmoderns, Foucault is a good example, feel in being labelled in this manner. It is possible, however, as was shown earlier, to define certain postmodern discourses as critical strategies. Following Cahoone, these strategies 'question the validity of modern methods without making explicit claims on their falsity'. It is this type of postmodern approach that is useful for feminism in a new wave. It does not assert the *falsity* of the theories of the second wave, but it does ask contingent questions about their validity - their usefulness and relevance - for feminist theorising and politics in a new wave. When postmodernism is viewed as a critical strategy, it is possible to identify a number of postmoderns who take this approach. The most relevant postmodern thinkers in this regard are Foucault, Kristeva, Rorty, Lyotard, Laclau and Mouffe. From their works it is possible to find a characteristic set of theories of the self and agency, society and language, and philosophy and knowledge that are useful as a critical strategy for contemporary feminist thought.

### *Postmodern theories of the self*

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<sup>48</sup> N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,' op.cit.



Most postmodern thinkers start by conceptualising the self in a non-essential and decentred manner. Like Romantic thinkers before them, in challenging the idea of the unified self many postmoderns have necessarily questioned the idea of universal human nature. They also challenge individual attempts to find coherent and authentic self-identity, believing that the self cannot be unified in this manner. In this view of selfhood, postmoderns have been influenced by Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the decentred, complex self who has no *essential* core of reason or even creativity. For Lacan, the two crucial elements that constitute self-identity are its relations with 'Others' and its use of language to describe and understand itself. As he writes, 'the Other is, therefore, the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks to him who hears, that which is said by one already being the reply'.<sup>49</sup> In other words every time the subject speaks - uses language - it does so to answer another person and automatically confirms its intersubjective status. What emerges from Lacan's work is not a fragmented self, a self that is incapable of relating to itself or others, but a *decentred* self who is dependent on both its social relationships and its ability to use speech, to define itself. The self is thus decentred because, quite literally, it can never be itself, it can only be itself relating, replying, to 'Others'.<sup>50</sup> The self thus finds itself with a number of different identities as it interacts with different people, in different circumstances.

For postmoderns such as Kristeva, Rorty, Lyotard and Foucault, this view of the decentred self has wide social and philosophical implications. Socially, it indicates the contingency of, what Kristeva comes to refer to as, 'the speaking subject' on the social structures of language, laws, power relations and relationships with others. These social structures are inescapable because they pre-exist each subject. As Lyotard writes, 'even before he is born...the human child is already positioned as the

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<sup>49</sup> J. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, op.cit., p. 141.

<sup>50</sup> This idea is of course akin to the existential idea of existence preceding essence, but Lacan did not share the existentialist's belief that the lack of self-unity was a negative condition leading to bad faith, *ibid.*, p. 6.

referent in the story recounted by those around him'.<sup>51</sup> However, the self is not entirely powerless before these structures and thus decentring does not mean the complete loss of autonomy: the same social structures that decentre the subject also provide the conditions for its agency.

According to Jon Simons, who traces the decentred self in Foucault's work, the self both contributes to and is subjected by these social processes because,

The subject is neither wholly subjected nor entirely self-defining and self-regulating. The subject is indebted to the limits, however oppressive, imposed on him or her for the possibility of being anyone at all, having an identity and capacities to act.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, the subject is only a subject because of its social relationships. Yet, these social relationships that constitutes its subjectivity, also provide the limits to its actions as it faces and interacts with other people. Hence, for many postmoderns, there is always an ambiguity about the possibilities of subjectivity, given its dependence on social structures that it can never fully determine or control.

### *Postmodern theories of society and language*

It has been shown that for many postmodern thinkers social laws, relationships and language are instrumental in constituting the subject. They believe that selfhood and subjectivity are radically contingent on the social conditions of existence into which all subjects are born. Consequently, many postmoderns agree with Heidegger's notion of the 'thrownness' of being:<sup>53</sup> the way in which we find ourselves inescapably in a world that pre-exists us. The idea that subjectivity and selfhood is contingent on social conditions is not a new concept; Marx, for example, understood the contingency of existence. What differentiates the postmodern view of contingency from the Marxist one, is that they see society itself as complex, plural and fragmented. There is no single social process, such as the capitalist economy, that determines society in its totality. Thus, for most postmoderns society is irrevocably a plurality of discourses

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<sup>51</sup> J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 15.

<sup>52</sup> J. Simons, *Foucault and the Political*, op.cit., p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op.cit., p. 174.



and material conditions and has no single, social essence. As Lyotard argues, 'I am not claiming that the entirety of social relations is of this nature [governed by language games] but there is no need to resort to some fiction of social origins to establish that language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist'.<sup>54</sup> What is more, according to postmoderns, attempts to explain and understand society are likely to multiply and increase social complexity.

In the postmodern stance itself there are several different views of society. Thinkers such as Kristeva take a very conservative approach to society, believing that it constitutes itself through social laws. Although these laws can always be subverted or transgressed, this very transgression sets itself up as the new, authoritative social law.<sup>55</sup> Foucault also sees society conservatively, as a network of power relations. According to Foucault, the social subject both dominates and is dominated by these relations.<sup>56</sup> Again, his analysis does not understand society in terms of one relationship of power, such as men dominating women, but envisions it as a mass of social practises and laws. Other postmoderns have a more celebratory view of social diversity and fragmentation. For example, Lyotard believes that the openness of society should be fostered and celebrated and he demands that we 'activate the differences' within it.<sup>57</sup> Despite their different positions, most postmoderns agree that society is a complex mass of processes and as such cannot be rationally ordered or objectively understood by a single theoretical principle. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe sum up the general postmodern attitude towards society, stating, 'there is no sutured space peculiar to 'society', since the social itself has no essence'.<sup>58</sup> Hence, for most postmoderns the only way to approach society is through a critical strategy that accommodates plurality, contingency and contradiction.

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<sup>54</sup> J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> J. Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, op.cit., p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, op.cit., pp. 61-65.

<sup>57</sup> J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 82.

<sup>58</sup> E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, op.cit., p. 96.

### *The end of knowledge and philosophy?*

Philosophy and knowledge are contingently generated within these complex societies. Not least, because the author and subject of these discourses is a contingent product of his or her social existence. Hence, most postmoderns believe that the theorist cannot philosophically 'found' knowledge and discourse; he or she can only add to a discursive tradition that pre-exists them. They also believe that knowledge cannot uncover or shape 'Truth'. In Lyotard's famous phrase, postmodernism is characterised by 'incredulity toward metanarratives' or, put more simply, disbelief in overarching philosophical theories.<sup>59</sup> According to this argument, the most the theorist can do is contingently construct a discourse. Rorty argues that even the language the theorist might use in this process is contingent, it is not 'out there' as a mediator between theorist and reality. Thus, it will not reveal the essence of the world, society or knowledge because, as Rorty writes, 'the world does not speak. Only we do'.<sup>60</sup> Postmodernism places the theorist in the sway of language, constructing narratives that aim, not to uncover 'Truth,' but serve to create better 'redescription' of the world as it presently stands.<sup>61</sup>

The philosopher is therefore situated in the society she seeks to describe. Hence, she can only ever provide a partial understanding and interpretation of the world: what is rightly called a 'perspective'. She can neither step outside of the society of which she is a contingent product nor escape her political language.<sup>62</sup> For Foucault this embeddedness means that the individual is displaced as the master of thought, such that political theory and practise cannot be understood simply by examining individual or collective consciousness. Rather, Foucault believes that understanding political knowledge means understanding how individuals, social groups and political

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<sup>59</sup> J. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, op.cit., p. xxiv.

<sup>60</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op.cit., p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>62</sup> A. Camus, *The Rebel*, (London: Penguin, 1971), pre-dating postmodern, summed up the philosopher's embeddedness, noting, 'the impossibility of man[']s grasping totality, since he lives in the midst of this totality,' p. 253.



behaviour are interwoven by discursive practises that pre-exist them.<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, if Foucault's approach is followed, postmoderns develop a critical strategy towards theory and knowledge that will,

look for a field of regularity for various positions of subjectivity. Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined.<sup>64</sup>

The postmodern scepticism towards objective knowledge, therefore, does not entail the rejection of theory. Rather, it suggests that philosophical projects are limited, they are no more than the perspective of the embedded theorist and as such they will not always be treated as truth and will often be contested.

Consequently, postmoderns who create critical strategies believe that the self, society and knowledge are contingently produced. This leads to a general philosophical position that seeks out the limits, contradictions and possibilities of traditional methods of thought. It looks at how knowledge and discourse can be both enabled and constrained by the fragmented nature of the self and society. It is not the end of philosophy or knowledge, because, as Noël O'Sullivan writes, 'what it ends is only philosophy as the traditional Western search for a completely transparent, non-metaphorical language of *presence*, with all the arbitrary dualisms...that search creates' (his italics).<sup>65</sup> There are three clear political implications from this critical strategy that need to be examined. Firstly, it questions the possibility of finding essential identity. Secondly, it imposes limits on the search for an overarching and objective political theory. Thirdly, it rejects utopian political settlements.

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<sup>63</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith, (London and New York: Routledge, 1972) p. 194, believes this is a better indicator of political behaviour than looking at how it might be determined by ahistorical economic forces and thus ignoring the actual interplay of politics.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>65</sup> N. O'Sullivan, 'Political Integration, the Limited State, and the Philosophy of Postmodernism,' *Political Studies*, Vol. XLI, p. 29.

## **The political implications of postmodernism**

To return for a moment to Habermas's thoughts on postmodernism, it will be remembered that he argued that the theory was at best politically conservative and at worst apolitical and nihilistic. However, it was stated that many postmoderns, particularly those who create a critical strategy, often began writing postmodern theory in light of the developments in twentieth century politics. They reacted to both the experience of totalitarian politics and the decline of radical activist movements and tried to make sense of these developments. It would be useful therefore to reconsider postmodernism as a political theory with several implications for political practice.

Put briefly, postmodern theories have three implications for political projects that can be derived from their views of the self, society and philosophy. Firstly, they are sceptical of the possibility of identity politics because they believe that the political subject is decentred and defined in terms of a number of different identities. Secondly, they stress the plurality of all political concepts and thought so that a concept such as gender or patriarchy has no true or inherent meaning. Thirdly, postmodern theories emphasise the contingency and conditionality of all political thought, given that utopian and transcendental political projects are impossible. Given these characteristics, it is then possible to see how feminist politics develops within a postmodern political framework.

### *Anti-essentialism and the problem of identity politics*

The postmodern view of the self feeds into its view of political and social agency. The last section suggested that many postmoderns believe the self, as a political and social agent, is constrained and constituted through society and its social relationships. It is decentred and multiple, and does not have an 'authentic' human identity and agency to which rational appeals to action could be made. Indeed, the subject never achieves the unity or finality of authentic being. While authenticity demands that the subject be true to itself, postmoderns believe decentring makes this type of selfhood impossible. As



Kristeva says, the self is always a 'subject-in-process'.<sup>66</sup> It is never completed and can only experience being in relation to others. Thus, the postmodern scepticism towards the possibility of authentic identity has implications for its view of identity politics and collective political activity.<sup>67</sup> Most postmoderns do not reject the possibility of collective political activity but, first and foremost, reject the idea that such agency can be founded on a vision of common authentic identity. Hence, they are sceptical of identity politics that seek to uncover, find or affirm essential identities.

Kristeva applies her postmodern scepticism towards identity politics to the feminist example.<sup>68</sup> For Kristeva any politics based on the quest for essential identity becomes increasingly arbitrary and dogmatic so that it can 'fix' the identity in question. As she writes:

each time, the mobilisation takes place in the name of a...human essence imagined as good and sound; in the name, then, of a kind of fantasy of archaic fulfilment which an arbitrary, abstract and thus even bad and ultimately discriminatory order has come to disrupt...exposes one to the risk that the so-called good substance, once it is unchained, will explode, without curbs, without law or right to become an absolute arbitrariness.<sup>69</sup>

Kristeva observed this process happening in the second wave movement and warned that as long as the feminist movement continued its quest for essence, it would fail to recognise that neither males, females, or humans have a core united identity. She went on to argue that feminists, instead, needed 'to bring out - along with the singularity of each person...the multiplicity of every person's possible identifications'.<sup>70</sup>

Postmoderns thus reject identity politics and essentialism, but still believe in the possibility of political agency. They open up the possibilities of agency that radical activist movements, such as feminism, closed down in becoming more authoritarian. The subject's agency opens up because it has a number of possible identifications. It

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<sup>66</sup> Toril Moi, 'Introduction,' in T. Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, op.cit., p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> I have deliberately used the rather jargonised and lengthy 'collective political activity' to differentiate it from the more traditional idea of solidarity. This distinction has been made to avoid the connotations of authentic, collective political action that underpin the idea of solidarity, and of which many postmoderns are sceptical.

<sup>68</sup> See especially J. Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' in J. Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, op.cit., pp. 187-213.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

is no longer defined in relation to one social process such as patriarchy and in terms of which it is always the victim. Kristeva captures this sense of multiple identity, stating that it is necessary to conduct an 'analysis of the *potentialities* of victim/executioner that characterise each identity, each subject, each sex' (my italics).<sup>71</sup> What Kristeva is suggesting here is that if the subject is only a victim of oppression, then it cannot act. To act it must have some autonomy, some potential for agency. But this potential, in turn, means that they are never fully victimised. Her stance can be contrasted with the radical feminist position that often portrayed women as the complete victims of patriarchy, making it difficult to understand how these same women could then come together for a revolution. In the postmodern view, the subject, in response to its dual position, still has possibilities for agency, but accepts the contingency of these on existing political practices.

### *Contingency and anti-foundationalism*

The status of knowledge and philosophy is, as has been seen, a central issue in postmodern theory. They tend to reject the possibility of rational and objective founding knowledge and philosophy. They emphasise instead the contingency of philosophy and the *contextual* – not the *subjective* – location of the philosopher/theorist.<sup>72</sup> The latter must in effect make sense of a world in which they already live, in which they are already present, and which has already constituted them as a subject. The belief in the contingent nature of philosophy and knowledge has three implications for political discourses and concepts. One, that political discourses are vested with interests and power relations. Two, that political discourses can never be overarching or foundational. And three, that the plurality of political discourses and concepts leads to an agonal sense of contest and conflict in all political processes.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>72</sup> Postmoderns do not simply replace objective theory with subjective theory, they see the subject herself as being situated in a wider social structure which determines their philosophical outlook. Hence, postmodern theory is not endorsing solipsism. Indeed, in many respects, postmoderns hope to overcome dualisms such as objective/subjective.



Theorists construct political discourses by using their contingent traditions of political thought and practice as resources. These existing traditions are the only resources available to theorists, as Rorty has argued, 'if there is no center to the self, then there are only different ways of weaving new candidates for belief and desire into antecedently existing webs of belief and desire'.<sup>73</sup> Hence, political discourses are constructed and legitimated within existing traditions of thought. It was shown, for example, how postmodern themes are themselves the products of several traditions of Western thought. On these terms, political discourses are constructs that are invested with interests and power relations as opposed to rationality and 'truth'. Discourses become strategies and tactics to mobilise people and to voice interest claims. Indeed, many postmoderns have gone on to salvage the rhetoric tradition; noting that it is often more important to political discourse and opinion than 'Truth'.<sup>74</sup> Hence, once political discourses are seen as constructs, and rhetorical ones at that, they are assessed in a more limited manner. Postmoderns see their political theories as limited and temporary, running their course and facing new circumstances and other political discourses.

The modern humanist traditions and radical doctrines of activist politics have not always recognised competing political discourses. They have tended to write dissent off as irrational, inauthentic or the product of false-consciousness. Chapter One illustrated how many active feminists in the 1970s forced out dissent to protect 'true' theory. In contrast, by recognising the contingency of political discourses and concepts, postmoderns develop a different response to contest and dissent. It is seen as both inevitable and desirable. Foucault's work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, for example, uses a historical method of 'archaeology' to assess how seemingly competing discourses overlap and develop. He believes that, compared to the methods of traditional histories of thought which attempt to summarise the 'general spirit of the

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<sup>73</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op.cit., pp. 83-84.

<sup>74</sup> For example, Chantal Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 14, cites with approval Arendt's belief that politics is governed by 'doxa' (opinion) and not truth, and thus re-asserts the role of rhetoric in political discourse.

age,'<sup>75</sup> archaeology has a 'critical role'. He says, 'archaeology...is not intended to reduce the diversity of discourses, and outline the unity that must totalise them, but is intended to divide up their diversity into different figures'.<sup>76</sup> For Foucault archaeology challenges discourses and their constitutive elements and has ramifications for the analysis of political knowledge. Its methodology can accommodate the simultaneous existence of many discourses - for example, the existence of both Romantic and Enlightenment discourses in modernity. Given this plethora of discourses, the same concept can be used in a number of distinct discourses, often in contradictory ways. For example, the concept of gender is interpreted differently by humanist and gynocentric feminist positions. Humanist feminists view female's gender identity as a distorted and denied human essence, whereas gynocentric feminists view it as a source of positive, feminine values. Foucault would not argue that all descriptions of gender are equal, and he would allow for the fact that some have been more dominant at times than others. He would only suggest that no concept of gender can be privileged as the true or authentic one. Nor does Foucault's work abandon conceptualising and theorising. It is rather, as David Owen states, an attempt to 'unsettle the seemingly natural and necessary character of our epistemic perceptions,'<sup>77</sup> i.e. our belief systems. Hence, feminists who applied this principle to their work would not be able to provide a definition of gender that assumed the inclusion of all women. They would instead characterise the concept as 'a space of multiple dissension, a set of different oppositions whose levels and roles must be described'.<sup>78</sup>

Consequently, in acknowledging the contingency and thus the plurality of political discourse and concepts, two interesting attitudes to thought emerge. Firstly, the theorist owns up to, or takes responsibility for, their particular construction of political discourse. They do not see it as the product of universal law, universally held rational principles or authentic ways of being. Secondly, the theorist realises that

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<sup>75</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 15.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 159-160.

<sup>77</sup> D. Owen, *Michel Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Ethics*, an unpublished paper, (University of Southampton, 1998), p.4.



political discourses cannot be controlled once they have been disseminated, because they are then open to new interpretations and developments.<sup>79</sup> By taking responsibility for a political discourse, the theorist acknowledges that it is vested with interests and power relations, as O'Sullivan notes, 'from the postmodern standpoint, therefore, politics can only seek to canalise power and use it constructively; to aim at abolishing power is futile and potentially destructive'.<sup>80</sup> If political discourses are always seen in this way, then it is harder to suggest that those who disagree with a particular discourse are irrational as opposed to being contingently or materialistically opposed to the discourse. In this sense postmodernism endorses value-pluralism, or, as Foucault suggests analogously, a sense of 'polysemia' in which 'the same group of words may give rise to several meanings, and to several possible constructions; there may be, therefore, interwoven or alternating, different meanings operating on the same enunciative base'.<sup>81</sup> For example, feminism gave rise to many different theories, strategies and objectives.

So what is the status of the theorist in relation to these discourses? On the one hand, the theorist is extremely important in the providing the meaning of discourses. The intentions, interests and social status of the theorist infuse the thought and need acknowledgement; they need to be seen to take responsibility for their own discourse. On the other hand, the theorist also experiences a radical separation from their ideas and concepts as they interact with other discourses and social structures.<sup>82</sup> For example, the feminist discourses of the 1970s interacted with Marxist and liberal discourses, and with the demographic changes in society happening at that time, to

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<sup>78</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 155.

<sup>79</sup> Mouffe and Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, op.cit., have theorised how discourses interact with social structural factors and other discourses to give rise to different meanings, further pluralising them. They used the example of how the growing importance of the idea of liberty in the 1980s became tied to the atomised individualism of New Right doctrines because the left, at the time, only concentrated on equality and the struggle for cultural liberty. Hence, liberty needed to be theorised according to leftist theory to give the idea a different discursive interpretation and to break the New Right hegemony, p. 164.

<sup>80</sup> N. O'Sullivan, 'Political Integration, the Limited State, and the Philosophy of Postmodernism,' op.cit., p. 31.

<sup>81</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 110.

take on a very different character to either first wave feminist theories or standard Marxist and liberal accounts of politics.

Such separation may initially appear to be a loss of control. The discourses appear to simply speak through the theorist, descending into relativism, whereby a number of equal political discourses seamlessly mingle in society, none having any normative dominance over the other. However, the postmodern theorist, rather than fear the loss of control, accepts that her discourses will be contested because they are open to a plethora of interpretations. Jon Simons has also recognised, with particular reference to Foucault's work, this sense of constraint and openness, where thought is both constrained by the role of the theorist, yet open to new discourses. He refers to this situation as an inescapable ambiguity between the 'poles of unbearable heaviness and lightness'.<sup>83</sup> The 'heaviness' being the limits to thought because of the social embeddedness of the theorist, and the 'lightness' being the transgression of thought through its interaction and conflict with other discourse. In other words, an agonal view of political discourse emerges in which political discourses relate to, and conflict with one another. This sense of agonism is examined in greater detail in Chapter Five. It is not relativism, but the recognition of the impossibility of having the final say because political concepts will continue to be contested. Rorty defends himself against a similar charge of relativism by citing Joel Schumpeter's view that, 'to realise the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian'. Rorty goes on to make the point that a belief must be considered to be minimally relative – something to be judged in *relation* to other concepts - if it is to be defended; after all, if everybody agreed with the belief, why does it need to be justified?<sup>84</sup> Postmoderns who see their discourse as critical strategy thus recognise the limits of political discourse and favour temporary and

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<sup>82</sup> Foucault describes how discursive and non-discursive factors interact, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, *ibid.*, pp. 44-47.

<sup>83</sup> J. Simons, *Foucault and the Political*, *op.cit.*, sees this polarity as a constant theme of Foucault's work and discusses it in relation to thought on p. 88.

<sup>84</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, *op.cit.*, pp. 46-47.



piecemeal political settlements. They therefore espouse anti-utopianism and localised political activity as opposed to large-scale revolutionary activity.<sup>85</sup>

### *The end of utopian dreams*

The postmodern stress on the contingency of thought and the plurality of political discourses implies political anti-utopianism. If all thought is contingent on existing social and political discourses, then these cannot be transcended by utopia. Utopia - seen as the complete transcendence of the existing order - would remain impossible, always contaminated by the very practices it was seeking to go beyond. Albrecht Wellmer recognises the anti-utopian implication of postmodernism, stating:

With postmodernism, ironically enough, it becomes obvious that the critique of the modern, inasmuch as it knows its own parameters, can only aim at expanding the interior space of modernity, not at surpassing it. For it is the very gesture of radical surpassing - Romantic utopianism - that postmodernism has called into question.<sup>86</sup>

Postmoderns also question the possibility of utopia because it signals finality, the end of contingency and with it the possibility of politics. Kristeva notes the impossibility of going beyond social laws to set up an 'a-topia'<sup>87</sup> - which she defines as a space beyond law - because to do this would also mean the end of politics. There would be no politics because there would be no laws to subvert, nothing to resist or contest. Many postmoderns therefore not only believe that utopia is impossible, but also feel it to be undesirable.

In the end, postmodernism is not about transcendence, it is an immanent critique. It is this that puts it at odds with many philosophical traditions, particularly the radical humanist one, which aim to be transcendent in their critique. As an immanent critique it outlines the constraints brought about by the historic and social contingency of existence, the diversity of these conditions of existence and the limits of social interdependence. Indeed, as Mouffe has recognised, postmodernism is

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<sup>85</sup> M. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, op.cit., p. 384.

<sup>86</sup> A. Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics and Postmodernism*, Trans., D. Midgely, (Cambridge (Mass.): The MIT Press, 1991), p. vii.

<sup>87</sup> J. Kristeva, 'Women's Time,' op.cit., p. 202.

concerned with limits.<sup>88</sup> Whereas, a thinker such as O'Sullivan interprets this postmodern sense of limits as a return to political 'modesty',<sup>89</sup> other thinkers, like the later Foucault, look for the limits of possibility, the point at which the subject can still act, still resist.<sup>90</sup> Hence, for postmoderns who create critical strategy, utopia is impossible. There can simply be no space beyond laws and power, no space in which a final human condition can be founded. Political settlements are themselves contingent and thus utopia cannot be grounded beyond this. It is now necessary to take these three political implications of postmodernism - its anti-essential view of the political subject; its emphasis on the contingency and plurality of political discourses, and its anti-utopianism - and spell out in detail their influence on feminism in a new wave.

### **Postmodernism in a new wave of feminism: new theories, old problems**

Postmodernism's influence on feminism developed in the 1980s. Although many feminists were initially sceptical about postmodernism, it was clear by the early 1990s that some feminist had begun to incorporate it into their thinking. Few of these feminists actually saw themselves as 'postmodern-feminists', and for most it was an exercise in appropriation and not wholesale endorsement. Given that many feminists have used postmodernism in a limited manner, it has been necessary to see postmodernism as a critical strategy to fully understand its impact on feminism. Hence, once postmodernism is seen as a critical strategy - questioning the validity and usefulness of certain methods of thought - its influence in a new wave of feminist thinking becomes clear. It becomes necessary to give a detailed account of how the postmodern themes of anti-essentialism, contingency and anti-utopianism, identified in the previous section, have led to new ways of theorising feminist political agency, collectivity and movement politics.

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<sup>88</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., pp. 15-16.

<sup>89</sup> N. O'Sullivan, 'Political Integration, the Limited State, and the Philosophy of Postmodernism,' op.cit., p. 34-35.

<sup>90</sup> J. Simons, *Foucault and the Political*, op.cit., p. 82.



### *The place of anti-essentialism in the new wave of feminism*

It is easy to see the influence of anti-essentialism in contemporary feminist thought. Diane Fuss and Elizabeth Spelman were among the first feminists to theorise the implications of anti-essentialist discourse.<sup>91</sup> They indicated how second wave attempts to look for authentic femininity or authentic human identity were both essentialist and exclusionary. They called instead for new ways to appeal to women without essentialising them. Different feminists however have applied this idea in different ways. Iris Young, for example, suggests that any future feminist movement must have separate sections for women, in accordance with age, ethnicity, religion etc.,<sup>92</sup> to avoid charges of essentialism. Elizabeth Spelman, in contrast, warns against an overly simple approach to anti-essential, multiple identities, arguing that it is not possible to neatly separate out, for example, gender identity from ethnic identity. For Spelman our identities are interdependent.<sup>93</sup> Chantal Mouffe is in accord with Spelman's approach and argues that feminists, in light of anti-essentialism, need to ask different questions that do not assume a common identity or a set social group of 'women'.<sup>94</sup>

According to these debates, the postmodern view of the decentred, anti-essential self has two consequences for feminism. Firstly it effectively undermines the idea of the subject determined entirely by its gender identity. Secondly, it suggests that the subject is actually made up of an ensemble of identities. As Nancy Fraser argues, the postmodern view of decentred social identity means that 'no-one is simply a woman' and, moreover, 'one is not always a woman to the same degree'.<sup>95</sup> Hence, women will not always politically act as feminists and when they do so, it will be from different perspectives. Feminists coming to terms with feminist fragmentation have

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<sup>91</sup> D. Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), and E. Spelman, *Inessential Women*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).

<sup>92</sup> I. Young, 'The Five Faces of Oppression', *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) pp. 39-65.

<sup>93</sup> E. Spelman, *Inessential Women*, op.cit., p. 133.

<sup>94</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., pp. 78-79.

thus found the anti-essentialist critique invaluable. It allows feminists to admit the differences between women and to search for ways to give them adequate representation without calling into question the validity of a feminist project.

However, anti-essentialism is still controversial. Humanists fear that anti-essentialism reifies the differences between men and women, as well as between women, thus validating gynocentric views of women's intrinsic gender difference.<sup>96</sup> This fear is misguided and can be refuted once the differences between the postmodern and gynocentric positions are properly understood. To reiterate, gynocentric feminists are keen to assert women's differences from men. Contrary to most humanist feminists, they do not see this difference as something that feminists should seek to overcome. Rather, gynocentrics, such as Susan Bordo, tend to see women's differences as a source of positive, feminine values that need to be protected.<sup>97</sup> For many gynocentric feminists, women should thus seek recognition for these different values in the hope that a new ethical perspective can be formed that does not privilege rationality and autonomy above care and interdependence. Hence, while most gynocentric feminists and most postmodernists do question the dominance of the values of rationality and autonomy, and agree that our intersubjective relations are crucial in defining our identities, there are still grounds to distinguish between the two positions. Rita Felski has provided one of the best distinctions between the difference emphasis of gynocentric feminists and the difference emphasis of postmoderns and post-structuralists, stating, 'it is hard to see how a quasi-utopian vision of authentic, self-defined femininity [the gynocentric position] can be reconciled with a semiotic model that defines meaning as fundamentally relational, unstable and

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<sup>95</sup> N. Fraser, 'The Uses and Abuses of French discourse Theories for Feminist Politics,' in N. Fraser and S. Lee Bartky (eds.), *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays on Difference Agency and Culture*, (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 179.

<sup>96</sup> Susan Moller Okin, 'Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences,' *Political Theory*, Vol. 22, No. 1, (February 1994), p. 20 believes that the anti-essentialist position risks becoming a reactionary, 'worship of difference'.

<sup>97</sup> S. Bordo 'The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought,' in L. Cahoone (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, op.cit., pp. 653-655, gives a good account of recent gynocentric feminist thinking on the relation between 'masculine' and 'feminine' values.



impure'.<sup>98</sup> In other words, gynocentric feminists admit differences between men and women only by formulating essentialist theories about the historic construction of femininity and gender. However, most postmoderns question *all* constructions of essential subjectivity in favour of decentred selfhood, thus recognising the differences between women, as well as between men and women. Consequently, postmodern theories of anti-essentialism radically question the possibility and validity of identity politics in ways gynocentric ones do not. Hence, postmodern feminists do not reify the essential difference of women from men in the same way gynocentric feminists do. Their position is thus useful for feminists after the fragmentation of the second wave, and it is not - as humanist feminists tend to fear - a return to theorising an essentialistic feminine identity.

Humanist feminists also believe that the anti-essentialist critique only concentrate on the differences between women and undermines the common sense of solidarity needed for extensive political action.<sup>99</sup> To answer this sort of concern, it is necessary to understand anti-essentialism as part of the postmodern critical strategy. It is a starting point for theory, a way to come to terms with fragmentation and consider its implications for a future feminist movement. According to the anti-essentialist debate, there is no 'authentic' feminism - no benchmarks against which we can measure all claims to oppression - that could ground women's solidarity in an inclusive political movement. On the contrary there are a number of competing claims to identity and a concomitant number of interpretations of what liberty and equality mean for women. These differences undoubtedly make feminist collectivity harder to achieve, but they still need to be acknowledged.

Thus, the move to incorporate anti-essentialism into a new wave of feminist thinking leads to a twofold strategy to politically mobilise women and feminists. Firstly, anti-essentialism in the current debate allows feminists to re-conceptualise the

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<sup>98</sup> For example, Rita Felski, 'Doxa of Difference', *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (Autumn 1997) p. 6, notes that the utopianism of much recent gynocentric thought such as Drucilla Cornell's is at odds with post-structuralism, that precludes this type of utopian thinking.

future feminist movement as an alliance or coalition as opposed to a sisterhood. Georgia Warnke, Iris Young, Nancy and Judith Butler, among others, have suggested feminist coalitions.<sup>100</sup> As Nancy Fraser argues, given the diversity of women and feminists, the most that the feminist movement can be is a set of alliances, 'rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest or identity'.<sup>101</sup> In the alliance a number of different strands of feminist thinking come together while remaining distinct positions. Not only does this sense of alliance recognise the differences between women, it also allows individual women to change, and move between different sectors of the movement. Conceiving of the movement as an alliance also acknowledges that the movement is not representative of all women. It is only representative of those women involved and even then it must continually negotiate its claims to representation, to ensure that it is not ignoring certain groups of women. Secondly, given the limited nature of the alliance, feminists must ensure that women have many spaces for political action and participation. They must protect and promote women's identities as citizens for those times when the alliance does not speak for them. Anti-essentialism therefore suggests new strategies and political practises, which open up political spaces to women as both feminists and citizens.

### *Postmodern contingency and plurality in feminist political discourse*

It was shown earlier that postmodern thinkers emphasise the contingency of political thought. This emphasis has important implications for how feminists construct political discourses. It allows feminists to understand the multiplication of feminist theories, especially in the light of the second wave failure to unify feminist theory, and to understand women's common oppression. Iris Young, for example, no longer

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<sup>99</sup> M. Nussbaum, 'Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings,' in M. Nussbaum and J. Glover (ed.), *Women, Culture and Development*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) p. 63.

<sup>100</sup> See G. Warnke, 'Discourse Ethics and Feminist Dilemmas of Difference,' in J. Meehan, (ed.), *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, (New York: Routledge, 1995) pp. 258-260, J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, op.cit., and I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 162.

<sup>101</sup> N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism,' op.cit., p. 391.



assumes women's common social oppression and recognises that different women have different experiences of oppression. She also argues that oppression is itself a multiple concept; and she finds that what is oppressive for one woman, is not for another.<sup>102</sup>

However, there are again feminist criticisms of this stress on contingency and plurality in the construction of political discourse. Many humanist feminists believe that the postmodern critique of reason and rationality will further undermine women's social position. In their view women share a core set of human characteristics with men,<sup>103</sup> and, thus, feminism should continue to secure for all women the human right to make autonomous decisions about their life, free from dependent relations on men or children. Humanist feminists thus fear that postmodern theory will undermine the idea of a human nature based on rationality and autonomy and leave women subordinated. Consequently, for many humanist feminists, postmoderns no longer allow the individual to shape and decide their own identity, but leave the self passive and ineffective before social processes. Sabina Lovibond has summed up humanist feminist fears of postmodernism, asking, 'How can anybody ask me to say goodbye to 'emancipatory metanarratives,' when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?'<sup>104</sup> Behind Lovibond's fear is the belief that it is still necessary to create grand, emancipatory theory. Any other action threatens to further oppress women and impede women's attempts at autonomous selfhood.

Gynocentric feminists share these fears about theory. Nancy Hartsock believes that the construction of a specific women's standpoint or point of view is necessary to found a feminist knowledge that will be the basis of women's positive contribution to thought and politics. She has suggested that postmodern views of theory and knowledge do not allow for the construction of alternative, coherent theoretical

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<sup>102</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 42.

<sup>103</sup> Martha Nussbaum has provided one of the most sophisticated attempts to reformulate universal human characteristics after the anti-essentialist critique. For a discussion of this, see M. Nussbaum, 'Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings,' op.cit., pp. 72-86.

<sup>104</sup> S. Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism,' in *New Left Review*, No. 178, (November/December 1989), p. 12.

perspectives because they question the possibility and validity of objective and universal knowledge and, on this basis, reject all attempts at knowledge. Consequently, Hartsock believes that postmodernism again leaves women oppressed:

For those of us who have been marginalised and subjugated in various ways and who need to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodern theories at their best fail to provide an alternative to the Enlightenment.<sup>105</sup>

Yet these criticisms seem to doom feminism to repeat the battles of the second wave, searching for the universal sisterhood in a society, in which it has to be said, this quest is even more of a distant dream than it was in the second wave. It hardly needs repeating that women are not a cohesive minority group, they cross ethnic, class and religious divisions. In other words women are rooted in wider society and have many social roles. It thus follows that they have different levels of marginalisation as well as demands and interests. To respond to this dynamic social situation, it is necessary act with flexibility and contingency. Indeed, according to Felski, the divides between difference (gynocentric) and equality (humanist) feminists could be broken by a more contingent view of feminist politics in which feminists strategically operate using both positions. Hence, she calls for,

a double strategy...a deconstructive reading of the equality/difference distinction as philosophically unstable...combined with a pragmatic analysis of the contingent political utility adhering to either side of this dialectic for specific groups of women.<sup>106</sup>

On these terms, it is not possible to prescribe in advance exactly who will be involved in a future feminist movement, what issues will concern it or what its political strategy will be. But it is clear that the second wave's predisposition to create 'seven point manifestos' needs to be replaced by a less rigid reading of what particular women need at a particular point in time.

The recognition of contingency also consolidates new wave feminism's concern with alliance rather than sisterhood, which was outlined in the section above. The diffuse and diverse structures of a political alliance can reflect the call for

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<sup>105</sup> N. Hartsock, 'Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory,' *Cultural Critique*, No. 14, (Winter, 1989-1990) p. 21



contingency, changing to meet different women's needs in different political circumstances. Jon Simons has summarised the strategic implications of the new feminist concern for coalition thus:

Coalition is depicted by some feminists as an unsafe and unsettling space in which differences have to be dealt with. It is a space fit for agonal subjects for whom difference is not something to overcome in order to establish a common identity, but a resource for resistance.<sup>107</sup>

On these terms, the feminist alliance is not a kind of loose sisterhood, it is a forum for constructing political strategies. Further, if feminists are seriously calling into question this notion of idealised solidarity, then they must be realistic about the potential of a coalition. A coalition based feminist politics then is always open to the threat of factionalism and even disintegration. Feminists must thus be ready to accept other modes of politics for those times when the alliance has broken down or is dormant. Moreover, following the postmodern emphasis on decentred, multiple identities, feminists hoping for coalition politics must realise that some women will not want to be involved in specifically feminist politics. It seems vital therefore to ensure women have other political options and other viable political identities for those times when the alliance may be fractured.

With these provisos, the limited view of the feminist movement as a contingent alliance, seems a more realistic prospect than humanist and gynocentric feminists' continued hope for a united movement of all women. An alliance suggests that feminism operates as a political strategy. It would be a temporary coming together of different perspectives to push through a single issue or a limited agenda as opposed to establishing ideological notions of the sisterhood or visions of feminist authenticity. This alliance system has good precedents because historically feminism has always been at its most politically effective when it has operated as a loose alliance.

### *Anti-utopianism in the new wave*

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<sup>106</sup> R. Felski, 'Doxa of Difference', op.cit., p. 18.

<sup>107</sup> J. Simons, *Foucault and the Political*, op.cit., p. 108.

Many second wave feminists believed in the separation of women from men, at least until the conditions for women's equality and liberation had been achieved. At its most extreme, feminists such as Adrienne Rich theorised 'women-centred' political and social spaces in which women could find their true and authentic identities. Other early second wave humanist feminists such as Shulamith Firestone had a different vision of utopia, seeing it as a society in which the differences between men and women had been eliminated. Postmodernism has been the first discourse since conservatism to be explicitly anti-utopian. Its theorists stress the contingency of subjects and discourses on existing social processes and philosophic traditions. These processes are simply inescapable, there are no other sources of political thought. Indeed every utopia would have to have its social conditions in existing society. It is the postmodern scepticism towards the possibility of founding coherent and objective knowledge and theory that lies behind more general feminist objections to postmodernism. Both gynocentric and humanist feminist theories agree that they need to find a unified feminist theory and movement for emancipation. Without a sense of shared identity, feminism would, on their accounts, be politically ineffective. As Patricia Waugh warns, 'feminism must posit some belief in the notion of effective human agency, the necessity for historical continuity in formulating identity and a belief in historical progress'<sup>108</sup> if it is to secure its political efficacy. At the level of theory and knowledge, many feminists thus continue to believe that postmodern doubts over the viability of objective and truth giving knowledge preclude a feminist theory of women's emancipation.

However, the postmodern rejection of utopian politics does not prevent feminist theorising, as these feminists fear. Rather, it suggests that feminists can no longer present their theories as neutral, innocent discourses. They must recognise that as feminist discourses contribute to society, so their discourses are also constituted by society. Their theories stop being rigid assertions of dogma, demanding ideological adherence as they did in the second wave, and become flexible political strategies.

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<sup>108</sup> P. Waugh, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory,' in P. Waugh (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, (London, New York, Melbourne, Auckland: Edward Arnold,



Strategies to get themselves heard, to present their ideas to those who may not be sympathetic and to take them into the most conventional political spaces if need be. Felski realises the power of *political* strategies, stating, 'both the construction of commonality among subjects and the assertion of differences between subjects are rhetorical and political acts, gestures of affiliation and disaffiliation that emphasise some properties and obscure others'.<sup>109</sup>

By ruling out utopian hopes, the new wave of feminism can politically centre women as citizens. They cannot expect a separate sphere for their politics, it will take place inextricably in modern, Western society where its objectives will be contested. Valerie Bryson supports this view that postmodern discourses can introduce conventional political strategies and centre women. She believes that by reinterpreting the state as a collection of power networks they promote, 'the idea that power is dispersed rather than concentrated in a unitary state'. Moreover, according to Bryson, this idea 'also opens up the possibility of subversive activity [by feminists] within its fragmented structures: rather than tackling an oppressive monolith'.<sup>110</sup> Thus, there can still be many feminist groups, devoted to many political strategies, but they must engage with existing political models, not in some future utopia.

Feminist thinkers such as Iris Young, Chantal Mouffe, Seyla Benhabib, Anne Phillips and Rita Felski have attempted to close the gap between feminism and postmodern discourses. They are sympathetic to postmodernism, attempting to re-conceptualise feminism as a middle ground between the claims of humanist feminists and gynocentric feminists. According to these feminists, postmodern theories are very appropriate for negotiating the theoretical problems that arise from conjoining diverse feminist theories. Postmodernism's anti-essentialism also means that women could be both humanist feminists and gynocentric feminists, because they have decentred and multiple identities. Furthermore, these thinkers recognise that feminism from now on will be a twofold process in which feminists seek to promote a distinctive feminist

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1992), p. 195.

<sup>109</sup> R. Felski, 'Doxa of Difference', op.cit., p. 105.

politics, at the same time as they seek to secure women's citizenship in conventional democratic institutions.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to suggest that the starting point for the interpretation of postmodernism and its implications for politics is to examine the intellectual sources of this thought in modernity. In terms of the intellectual sources, it was seen that most postmodern ideas about self, agency, society and language discourses have their precedents in Enlightenment, counter-Enlightenment, Romantic and early twentieth century concepts and discourses. In the twentieth century, postmodern discourses have been among the first discourses in the West to have emerged after the fascist and Soviet experiments of totalitarianism and the decline of radical activist politics. The post-totalitarian nature of postmodern discourses often leads to a strong seam of pessimism about the possibilities of utopian politics. Moreover, it is the reason why most postmodern theorists attempt to philosophise without recourse to 'metanarratives,' objective, universal theories of history and philosophy.

Instead of metanarratives, postmodern discourses accept the contingency of thought and knowledge, the decentring of subjectivity and the diversification of society in the West. It is a critical strategy, with clear political implications, to understand the pitfalls of modern, activist movements such as feminism. Postmodern theories of the self, society and philosophy were thus seen to question the possibility of identity politics, the quest for unitary theory and the demand for utopian political settlements that were commonplace in much second wave feminist thought.

Out of these implications a new wave of feminist thinking has emerged. These feminists have used postmodern discourses to point out the plurality of feminist discourses and concepts of gender identity. In terms of the movement politics, the new wave recognises that any points of commonality between women will necessarily be transitory as women hold other social positions that may be important to them and that

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<sup>110</sup> V. Bryson, *Feminist Debates: Issues of Theory and Practice*, (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 100.



are not reliant on their gender identity. Feminist politics thus becomes strategic, tactical and, indeed, powerful. Consequently, when postmodernism is applied to a new wave of feminism, two processes appear to be crucial. It must, firstly, concern itself with building the movement as a coalition or alliance. This sort of movement will continually be re-negotiated and in that sense political. However, it is the second function of new wave feminism that leads it back to politics and the political. It is this second function that concerns the political status of women: that they must co-exist with others who do not share their identities and who may not be sympathetic towards them. The second function of feminism therefore is to create a strictly political strategy. It is the political strategy that will emphasise the importance of citizenship for women, allowing women to politically engage and to get their interests heard in a political manner. Hence, this second function of feminism needs to theorise women as both citizens and feminists and find out which model of democracy is most amenable to feminism. The works of Benhabib, Young and Mouffe have led the way into this new wave, placing feminism in the framework of citizenship and democracy. Their work will be examined in the next three chapters.

## Chapter Three. A Dialogue with Postmodernism: Seyla Benhabib and the Model of Deliberative Democracy

### Introduction

So far it has been shown that postmodern themes have become increasingly influential in feminist analysis after the second wave. While few feminists have adopted an unmodified postmodern approach, many have appropriated it as a critical framework in which to reassess the second wave movement and move it into a new wave in which questions of women's citizenship are paramount. By using postmodern theory to question the essentialism, theoretical universalism and utopianism of the 1970s movement, feminists are now taking a more limited approach to their politics. In this approach feminists are trying to establish two things. Firstly, a new political alliance of feminists that will account for the differences between women. Secondly, because they realise that recognising diversity will make any alliance precarious, they want to situate women in a variety of political spaces and re-position them in the centre of democratic politics. On this account, once women become involved in democratic politics they can seek political inclusion as both citizens and as feminists, reflecting the multiplicity of their concerns.

Seyla Benhabib has been at the forefront of the new feminist thinking. She believes that postmodernism along with feminism is an important critique of the dominant Western tradition.<sup>1</sup> For her both discourses modify the modern view of the self and philosophy as objective, monistic and rational structures. By contrast, they posit the self as contingent and relational, and philosophy as contextual and constructed, not foundationalist. Following the postmodern and feminist critiques, Benhabib wants to revise the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy to challenge its view of objective and abstract, rational debate and thus make it more inclusive of women. For Benhabib this means retaining the models emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press and Blackwell, 1992) p. 3.



universal procedures for debate and inclusion, but modifying the models emphasis on the individuality and rationality of public actors, and its conception of a single, neutral public space. With these modifications, she believes that deliberative model can meet women's collective concerns as feminists and their democratic concerns as citizens.

While Benhabib acknowledges the postmodern critique, she is not a 'postmodern-feminist' in the vein of, say, Nancy Fraser. She is particularly wary of conflating the postmodern and the feminist critiques warning that

Postmodernism is an ally with whom feminism cannot claim identity but only partial and strategic solidarity. Postmodernism, in its infinitely skeptical and subversive attitude toward normative claims, institutional justice and political struggle, is certainly refreshing. Yet, it is also debilitating.<sup>2</sup>

One of her primary concerns about the debilitating affects of the discourse is that its theories of the self and philosophy will deny the possibility of autonomous social and political action. She argues that such action is essential if women are to be liberated. To ward off the postmodern threat to women's agency, she remains committed to a notion of the unified self and to minimal universal theories with which to ground women's political action.

Hence, it is necessary to examine Benhabib's dialogue with postmodernism and how her concept of gender and feminist identity fits into the postmodern framework. From here Benhabib's view of women as a collective movement will be considered to assess the basis of women's participation in the public political sphere. This question leads into her model of deliberative democracy and the issue of whether even a revised version of this model can allow women to find political inclusion as feminists as well as citizens.

### **A dialogue with postmodernism**

Benhabib engages with postmodern discourses to explore two areas of thought. Firstly, she addresses the affinity between postmodern and feminist discourses in their

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

critiques of the Cartesian subject.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, on the basis of such affinities, she considers how central political concepts can be re-conceptualised according to postmodern theory. To answer these questions, Benhabib considers two versions of postmodernism: 'strong postmodernism' and 'weak postmodernism'. While she sees the former as purely nihilistic, she does accept a reading of what she terms 'weak postmodernism' that has many similarities with the view of postmodernism outlined in the last chapter, questioning the validity of modern ideas of essentialistic and authentic identity, universalism and rationalism.<sup>4</sup>

### *Strong postmodernism*

Benhabib uses the example of Jane Flax's work to define 'strong postmodernism'. She thus characterises it as the 'death of man', the 'death of history' and the 'death of metaphysics'.<sup>5</sup> On Benhabib's reading, if such a view of postmodernism is taken seriously, it results in theoretical nihilism. This nihilism presents itself primarily in the 'death of man'. According to Benhabib, the 'death of man' is the result of strong postmodernism rejecting the rational, autonomous and transcendental Cartesian subject. The subject is effectively 'dead' in this process, because it is stripped of all autonomy of thought and action and then abandoned to discourse, becoming - in Flax's phrase - one more 'position in language'.<sup>6</sup> Benhabib's fear is that the subject is now no longer a unique and active individual with its own life history, but a void that is passive before these linguistic and textual definitions that it does not control. In terms of the 'death of metaphysics' a similar sense of nihilism emerges because strong postmodernists refuse to provide 'meta' philosophical theory or accept the objective status of the philosopher. For Benhabib this vision results in a philosophical relativism that, when applied to feminism, denies the objective status of feminist discourse as a theory that is able to transcend and systematise current social

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<sup>3</sup> I realise that not all feminists have critiqued the Cartesian tradition, but my use of 'feminist' in the singular is to mirror Benhabib's own use of the term. This usage can be seen as indicative of her general neglect of the immense diversity of feminist discourses that were delineated in chapter one.

<sup>4</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 213.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.



conditions. She believes that it is important for feminists to continue to produce these objective social and philosophical descriptions of reality if they are to bring about change.<sup>7</sup> The strong postmodernist thesis of the 'death of history' continues this nihilistic theoretical situation, making it impossible for feminists to recount coherent historical stories about women's oppression that could serve as the moral imperatives for their political and social action.<sup>8</sup>

Of all these theses, Benhabib is particularly concerned about the 'strong' postmodern conceptualisation of subjectivity. She believes that it leaves the subject as an 'empty position in language', replicating the very abstract characteristics of the Cartesian Cogito it sets out to refute. According to Benhabib, the strong postmodern self, like the Cogito, becomes an abstract entity that does not accommodate any of the features that make a 'human' identity, such as class, ethnicity or gender. Hence, the strong postmodern subject is simply a linguistic construct with no material reality. As she writes, it is 'merely a blank slate upon whom are inscribed the social codes of culture, a kind of Lockean tabula rasa in latter-day Foucauldian garb!'.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to these views, Benhabib wants to take account of the subject's bodily particularity and social embeddedness. Thus she posits a view of 'weak postmodernism' that criticises the abstractness of the Cogito without sacrificing the subject to language. Before addressing whether Benhabib has painted an accurate picture of the 'strong postmodern' view of the self, it is necessary to look at her portrayal of 'weak postmodernism' in some detail.

### *Weak postmodernism*

Benhabib classifies 'weak' postmodernism by reading it through and against strong postmodernism. Like strong postmodernism, it is sceptical towards foundationalist rationalism and it distrusts universal metanarratives. However, rather than reject philosophical knowledge, weak postmodernism still seeks new ways of formulating

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 220.

theory. Thus Benhabib engages with weak postmodernism to consider its claims about rationalism, universalism and subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> Although she does not think that these claims are unique to postmodernism, she acknowledges the impact of the discourse in current thinking and believes that it needs serious consideration. She concludes that elements of postmodernism, namely the weak version, 'entail premises around which critical theorists as well as postmoderns and possibly even liberals and communitarians can unite'.<sup>11</sup>

### *Scepticism towards rationalism and utopia*

For Benhabib a 'weak postmodern' position is sceptical to what she terms, 'legislating reason'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it is sceptical towards the type of Enlightenment reasoning, described in Chapter Two, which sought to consider moral and political dilemmas in an entirely abstract and objective manner. She believes that this type of reasoning is extremely problematic in terms of its claims to objectivity and its response to difference, stating that,

the illusions of a self-transparent and self-governing reason, the illusion of a disembedded and disembodied subject, and the illusion of having found an Archimedean standpoint, situated beyond historical and cultural contingency. They have long ceased to convince.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, according to Benhabib, the illusions of 'legislating reason' deny difference and ignore the social context of moral and political dilemmas. What is more, the transcendental premises of this type of reason also need to be questioned. Reason can never achieve the transcendental status of an 'Archimedean standpoint,' it is always, in Benhabib's words, 'the contingent achievement of linguistically socialised, finite and embodied creatures'.<sup>14</sup>

Benhabib's scepticism towards 'legislating reason' also has implications for her recent retreat from utopia. Benhabib no longer theorises her model of deliberative

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 6.



democracy as an 'utopian-ideal': as an Archimedean guide to how society should be ordered.<sup>15</sup> Rather, she believes that the model can be justified and given rational authority in terms of existing political circumstances. Hence, she claims that 'the deliberative theory of democracy is not a theory in search of a practice, rather it is a theory which claims to elucidate some aspects of the logic of existing democratic practices better than others'.<sup>16</sup> In other words, her model of democracy, reflecting her scepticism towards 'legislating reason', loses its utopian character and is contingently theorised in the context of Western democracy.<sup>17</sup>

### *Subjectivity and contingency*

Benhabib also addresses the Enlightenment and Cartesian view of the subject in the light of her new emphasis on contingency. For Benhabib the ideal of the abstract, autonomous and rational ego has been called into question by both feminist and postmodern discourses. The feminist discourse exposed the 'human' ego of modern thought as inherently male, while the 'weak postmodern' discourse has questioned the autonomous and abstract nature of this ego, arguing, in contrast, that selfhood is contingently produced. Consequently, for Benhabib, instead of theorising the autonomous, sovereign subject as master of the world, weak postmoderns find subjectivity through 'the study of contingent, historically changing and culturally variable social, linguistic and discursive practices'.<sup>18</sup> Benhabib welcomes this idea of contingent, socially produced selfhood, but does not endorse it as a purely linguistic construct. The subject is equally as dependent on concrete social relations for its sense of selfhood.

### *Moving from universalism to pluralism*

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<sup>15</sup> In *Situating the Self*, *ibid.*, she remains vociferously in favour of utopian thinking stating that, 'postmodernism...should not lead to a retreat from utopia altogether. For we, as women, have much to lose by giving up the utopian hope in the wholly other,' p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy,' *Constellations*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1994), p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> In the last chapter, *cf.*, pp. 75-77, it was noted that the postmodern emphasis on the contingency of thought and identity contributes to the rejection of utopian theories

Benhabib also uses weak postmodernism to challenge the Enlightenment view of universalist philosophy. She believes that the universalist claims of modern philosophy have met with increased value-pluralism in Western democratic societies to which they must respond. This value-pluralism produces, in her words, 'the indeterminacy and multiplicity of contexts and life-situations in which practical reason is always confronted'.<sup>19</sup> She argues that liberal tolerance is not sufficient to deal with this sort of value-pluralism because it cannot be kept privatised. Entrenched value-pluralism of this nature spills out of the private and into the public-political sphere because embodied individuals 'carry,' so to speak, the plurality of values into public deliberations. Consequently, liberal attempts to deal with diversity by relegating difference to the private sphere and leaving the public space neutral in regard to plural goods appear illegitimate and authoritarian. They depend on the actual exclusion of actors whose values and bodily difference threaten the neutrality of the public sphere. Hence, the presupposition of value-pluralism is central to her re-working of the deliberative model of democracy. Her new model is thus conceived as a challenge to those liberal political models that ask the individual to bring nothing to debate but their rationality.<sup>20</sup>

Benhabib therefore uses 'weak postmodernism' as a set of themes to modify the core concepts of the modern, Enlightenment political project. In this regard it is very similar to the view of postmodernism as a critical strategy, outlined in Chapter Two, in that it questions the validity and relevance of certain modern methods of thought but does not want to abandon a philosophical project. On her reading, the weak version does not reject all attempts at philosophy and social criticism, it seeks, instead, 'an epistemology and politics which recognises the lack of metanarratives and foundational guarantees but which nonetheless, insists on formulating minimal criteria

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<sup>18</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 212.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> I am aware that liberal thinkers such as Isaiah Berlin were also proponents of value-pluralism but, as John Gray shows, in *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 73-80, liberals who accept this idea form a distinct tradition in liberalism which he refers to as 'agnostic liberalism'. He sees this as different to the liberalism, being referred to here, of thinkers such as Kant and, more recently, Rawls.



of validity for our discursive and political practices'.<sup>21</sup> According to Benhabib, these minimal criteria, like modernist philosophical foundations, still require normative precepts of rationalism, universalism, and autonomous subjectivity. She thus attempts to conceive of these normative precepts in non-foundationalist ways.

### **The dialogue with postmodernism: outcomes and new directions**

Benhabib appropriates 'weak postmodernism', alongside feminist critiques and communitarian discourses, as a critical strategy to rethink and revalue modern concepts of subjectivity, rationalism and political reasoning, and universalism. In each instance, she attempts to formulate the concept as non-foundational and contingent. These new conceptualisations have important implications for her view of feminism and deliberative democracy and need close examination.

#### *Rethinking the subject of modernity*

Benhabib believes that modern views of the self are inadequate because they ignore the extent to which the self is a product of its social relationships. As she states,

The Enlightenment conception of the disembodied Cogito no less than the empiricist illusion of a substance-like self cannot do justice to those contingent processes of socialisation through which an infant becomes a person, acquires language and reason, develops a sense of justice and autonomy, and becomes capable of projecting a narrative onto the world of which she is not only the author but the actor as well.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, Benhabib stresses the contingent constitution of subjectivity. Once the subject is contingently situated in a concrete social context, a new philosophical view of selfhood emerges.

Her view of identity formation, like that of the communitarian thinker Charles Taylor, draws on Hegel's idea that self-consciousness is socially produced. On these terms, selfhood emerges from an amalgam of two processes: particularistic self-

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<sup>21</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-Francois Lyotard,' in L. Nicholson (ed.), *Postmodernism/Feminism*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 125.

<sup>22</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 5.

definition and universalistic recognition by others.<sup>23</sup> Hence, identity formation is never the product of an abstract and transcendental mind, as the Cartesian view suggests, because the subject is always contingently and materially situated in its body and social relationships. As she puts it, the self is situated in 'that web of narratives in which human beings' sense of selfhood unfolds'.<sup>24</sup> In effect, then, the self is always defined in relation to others on whom it depends for recognition and, because the self is produced in the context of its social relationships, it is always developing as it moves through life experiencing many different social relationships.

In many respects this view of the situated, relational and developing self seems to mirror the postmodern view of the anti-essential self discussed in Chapter Two. In both cases the subject finds definition primarily in relation to others and is in a constant process of development.<sup>25</sup> However, Benhabib fears that by stressing the social contingency of subjectivity, she is replicating the 'strong postmodern' view of the anti-essential, linguistic and textual self, which she believes to be passive and dehumanised. She thus wants to ensure that the subject has control over these social processes by reconciling the relational self, theorised by 'weak postmoderns', and the autonomous self of the modern tradition. Such reconciliation means that, as she argues, 'the situated and gendered subject is heteronomously determined but still strives toward autonomy'.<sup>26</sup> On these terms, the subject, if it is to be autonomous, must be able to bind its diverse roots into a coherent lifestory and create for itself a 'narrative unity'.<sup>27</sup> The narrative, in turn, must be coherent if the individual is to have a sense of agency and efficacy in relation to her life and her relationships with others. Benhabib therefore rejects the modern version of abstract identity formation in favour of intersubjective selfhood, while remaining committed to a modern concept of autonomy. This view of subjectivity has clear implications for her view of rationality and reasoning.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>25</sup> Cf., Chapter Two, pp. 63-65.

<sup>26</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 214.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 5.



### *Rethinking reason*

According to Benhabib the tradition of 'practical philosophy' has always been more attuned to context and contingency than standard modern universalist philosophy.<sup>28</sup> Hence, 'weak postmodernism' may have made the issue of contextual reasoning more salient but it fits into a wider tradition that has favoured 'interactive reasoning' over foundationalist reasoning. She argues that 'interactive reasoning' takes place in specific social and cultural contexts.<sup>29</sup> Further, those who exercise 'interactive reason' do not need to step outside of their social conditions, as the modern universalist tradition demanded, to deliberate on moral and political dilemmas. In fact they should refer back to existing values and rules and see dilemmas in relation to actual people suffering from actual problems. As Benhabib argues, 'reasons are of such a kind that they require to be understood; they can only be described from the participants' or actors' own perspectives'.<sup>30</sup> 'Interactive reasoning' is not therefore an abstract mental exercise resting on natural laws or objective principles. Once reason and the use of reason to philosophise are reconceived as contextual processes, Benhabib is able to modify the modern liberal concept of universalism.

### *Rethinking universalism*

For Benhabib both postmodernist and feminist criticisms of modern universalism have exposed the purportedly objective status of Western liberal philosophy as a front for the viewpoint of privileged males. On these accounts, it was not just inherently gendered, it failed to accommodate *any* form of social difference. Benhabib believes that Western philosophy ignored difference because it undertook political and moral deliberation purely from the standpoint of the "generalized other". In this viewpoint, she argues, 'we abstract from the individuality and concrete identity of the other' and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

look for 'what we, as speaking and acting rational agents, have in common'.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, for Benhabib, and here she agrees with feminist and postmodern discourses, by relying purely on this type of deliberation, modern philosophy was exclusionary. It merely reflected the stance of those who engaged in it: namely white, middle class males. However, Benhabib's response to such exclusion is not to reject all attempts at universal theorising. She does not see it as indicative of universal thinking in general, but as a result of a certain type of universalist thinking. Consequently, she wants to re-formulate universalist thinking so that it takes account of the "concrete other"<sup>32</sup> - the particularised standpoint of specific individuals and groups - as well as the, already privileged, standpoint of the "generalised other".

She calls this new type of thinking 'interactive universalism'. Like her concept of rationality, it is 'interactive not legislative, cognisant of gender difference not gender blind, contextually sensitive and not situation indifferent'.<sup>33</sup> Such universalism ultimately seeks to apply *locally* generated principles, which have taken account of social differences in their formulation process, to *universal* cases.<sup>34</sup> Hence, 'interactive universalism' starts from the particular and the concrete and works up to the universal rule, rather than abstracting out from the particular to find an objective and universally applicable law. This process is intended to allow for the creation of minimal universal theories without traditional universal theories' denial of difference. It must therefore be the outcome of a contingently generated debate underpinned by procedures of practical 'interactive reason,' which open deliberation up to diversity.<sup>35</sup>

Hence, like practical rationality, it occurs in a particular social and cultural context and is the result of a debate between many different groups of people. To ensure that the 'concrete other' is listened to in this process, Benhabib wants it to have

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-159.

<sup>32</sup> In Benhabib's words, to take account of the "concrete other" is 'to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution', *ibid.*, p. 159. She believes that this has traditionally been seen as the antithesis of universal thinking.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 227-228.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 167.



an institutional and procedurally protected presence.<sup>36</sup> In practice, this means ensuring that previously excluded social groups such as women participate in political deliberation. For Benhabib, even if these political and procedural conditions are met, any 'universal' standpoint that emerges from debate is a temporary outcome of a particular process; it is not a prescriptive foundation for all future action. Consequently, any decisions taken in terms of this concept of universalism are revisable in a future process of deliberation.

Benhabib thus uses a vision of weak postmodernism as a framework to ask critical questions about the modern tradition. On this basis she *revalues* sovereign subjectivity, transcendental rationalism, and universalistic and foundationalist philosophy. In this project she makes three amendments to the modern tradition. Firstly, she amends its view of the isolated, sovereign subject, taking into account the contingent location of the subject and the implications of this for political reasoning. Secondly, this reasoning, in turn, becomes a situated process, contingent on particular public actors debating particular social issues, which amends the modern idea of objective, abstract reasoning. Thirdly, she believes that the outcomes of such reasoning are temporary and revisable universal rules, not foundationalist universal laws governing all future action. Consequently, these views of political reasoning and universalising have clear implications for her model of deliberative democracy. In this model the political process is used to validate and legitimise normative criteria which are continually threatened by diversity. However, before this model is examined, it is necessary to look at her feminist theory and to consider the extent to which her revaluation of the modern tradition transforms the concepts of gender, female subjectivity and female agency.

### **After postmodernism: women, feminists and identity**

So far it is clear that Benhabib classifies second wave feminism as a *critique* of the modern tradition, that rests alongside postmodernism and critical theory. However, as

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

is shown in Chapter One, feminism is itself influenced and in some instances constituted by modern ideas of reason, subjectivity and universal thinking. By taking this view of second wave feminism as a critique of, rather than a part of, the modern tradition, Benhabib leaves it untouched by her theoretical shake-up of modernity. Hence, a tension emerges in her work whereby she revises her political model of deliberative democracy to accommodate difference, contingency, indeterminacy and value-pluralism, but does not subject feminism to the same theoretical process. Feminism, on her account, thus remains deterministic, unified and universalistic. It is therefore necessary to explain her feminist theory and consider the tensions it exposes in Benhabib's work in relation to postmodernism.

### *Issues of identity*

Benhabib's exceptional treatment of feminist thought is particularly apparent in her reading of women's identity formation. Here she explicitly privileges the autonomy of the self over its intersubjective relations with others. Put simply, for Benhabib women don't need to recognise their intersubjectivity - they have historically been defined and defined themselves in this manner - they need to assert their autonomy. The 'strong postmodern' critique of subjectivity, moreover, has made this assertion of autonomy even more necessary for women. Thus, she argues that feminists need to be extremely wary of the idea of the strong postmodern idea of the fractured self, as she writes,

given how fragile and tenuous women's sense of selfhood is in many cases, how much of a hit-and-miss affair their struggles for autonomy are, this reduction of female agency to a 'doing without the doer' at best appears to me to be making a virtue out of necessity.<sup>37</sup>

The importance of autonomy for women is explicit in her work on feminism. Benhabib believes that the female subject achieves a *complete* identity when she is able to be *fully* autonomous, ordering other people's responses to her subjectivity: 'the identity of the self is constituted by a narrative unity, which integrates what "I" can do, have done and will accomplish with what you expect of "me"'.<sup>38</sup> This is at odds

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 5.



with her view, stated elsewhere, that the subject is contingently situated and embedded in its social relationships. Therefore, in spite of her general claims about the contingency of selfhood, Benhabib ultimately privileges the autonomous self over the intersubjective self, as her own summary of her feminist position implies,

I have subscribed [since *Critique, Norm and Utopia*] to the notion that autonomy is not autarchy but rather the ability to distance oneself from one's social roles, traditions, history, and even deepest commitments and to take a universalistic attitude of hypothetical questioning toward them.<sup>39</sup>

While this may not be a view of the completely isolated self and she does expressly reject the connotations of 'autarchy', it is still a departure from her previous assertions.<sup>40</sup> She is effectively suggesting that autonomy is about escaping one's subjective contingency. Behind this view of selfhood and subjectivity, with its apparent renewed commitment to autonomy, is Benhabib's continued fear of 'strong postmodernism'. This fear rests on a misunderstanding of the 'strong' postmodern view of the self and its relationship to the intersubjective view of the self.

She misunderstands the postmodern view of the self because she believes that it is the polar opposite of the relational self. As she writes of Jane Flax and Iris Young, two postmodern-feminists, they 'strive to develop a "decentred" and "fractured" concept of the self *in the place* of the "connected" or "relational" self' (my italics).<sup>41</sup> However, as the analysis of the last chapter suggested, the postmodern view of the 'decentred' self is not necessarily a fractured self. It is actually similar to the view of the intersubjective self that she has some sympathy for in her non-feminist work. Both views place the self in a mesh of social relationships that define and sometimes constrain the self but without which no human self can exist.

To overcome this misunderstanding it is necessary to distinguish between the fractured self and the decentred self. The two are not synonymous. As Chapter Two

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<sup>39</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Sexual Difference and Collective identities: The New Global Constellation,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (1999), pp. 353-354n.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, I would take the view that if we subscribe to the idea of the intersubjective self then it is not possible to have the 'ability' to achieve this distance in any meaningful sense. And if we were to make a decision whilst having this 'distance', then it would seem to amount to an overly abstract one of the type that Benhabib has stated she wants to avoid.

<sup>41</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., pp. 196-197.

suggested, postmodern theories of the self consider the decentred self to be a *result* of the relational basis of the self. It is not as Benhabib claims a replacement for seeing the self as connected. Consequently, for postmoderns such as Foucault, Kristeva and Mouffe it is because the self is a product of diverse social relationships, or 'heteronomously determined' as Benhabib puts it, that unity and autonomy are elusive. Hence, the distinction between the 'decentred' and the fractured self becomes crucial. On the one hand, there is the concept of a decentred self, in which each subject comfortably holds a number of different identities reflecting the diversity of its social relationships. It may or may not consciously reflect on these to place them in a narrative unity. Further, even if the subject does undertake such a process, the narrative unity will not define the self in its entirety. On the other hand, it is a concept of the fractured self that is, as Benhabib recognises, characterised by crisis and that can leave the individual feeling meaningless. Hence, although postmoderns recognise the possibility of the fractured self, few advocate it as a way of being. Indeed, Jane Flax, who Benhabib cites as a bastion of the concept of fractured self, has concerns about it and argues that if permanent fragmentation of the self did occur, there would be a 'terrifying slide into psychosis'.<sup>42</sup>

Hence, the postmodern view of the decentred self does not so much reject the possibility of narrative unity, but indicates the ambiguity of selfhood that is relational and developing. The basic problem with Benhabib's view of the self is that she does not accept that the complex and tenuous process of identity formation, that she herself theorises, can end in conflict and indeterminacy. This is to say that, at the very least, the heteronomously determined self of Benhabib's work is likely to have a heteronomous identity that cannot be woven easily into a narrative unity.

Hence, Benhabib cannot reconcile the autonomous self and the intersubjective self and expect the resulting view of the self to be a harmonious and centred one: 'the one who succeeds in integrating these tales and perspectives into a meaningful life

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<sup>42</sup> J. Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the West*, (California: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 218-219.



history'.<sup>43</sup> For what is the self that has both intersubjective, care oriented elements and autonomous, justice oriented elements, but a decentred self? And like any decentred self it must accept that there will be times when its different concerns conflict - for example, when a women (or man) feels torn between the care of her family and her responsibility to the workplace. As a result of such a conflict, that Benhabib would recognise as valid, it is perfectly possibly that the decentred self could become *fractured*, not irrevocable so, but temporarily unresolved. Iris Young, moreover, shows how this sort of identity crisis can result in the positive affirmation of one's identity and concrete political action. As she notes, 'for people to become comfortable around others whom they perceive as different, it may be necessary for them to become more comfortable with the heterogeneity within themselves'.<sup>44</sup>

Further, in her unwillingness to endorse the decentred nature of identity in her view of feminism, Benhabib risks essentialising women in two ways. Firstly, by suggesting that women are determined by an essential sex-gender system that sees them, in a very de Beauvoirian analysis, 'remain in a timeless universe, condemned to repeat the cycles of life'.<sup>45</sup> And secondly, by arguing that women ought to seek out an autonomous life, as the only good life, if they are to be truly liberated. Thus, it is necessary to examine the implications of this view of women's identity in terms of her statement of feminist politics.

### **Movement politics: second wave legacies**

Benhabib in her vision of the feminist movement remains committed to second wave notions of universal sisterhood and identity politics. She continues to believe that any feminist movement must hold the objectives of 'enhancing the agency, autonomy and selfhood of women'.<sup>46</sup> For Benhabib it is the ability to be autonomous that allows

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<sup>43</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 198.

<sup>44</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 153.

<sup>45</sup> S. Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory' in S. Benhabib and D. Cornell (eds.), *Feminism as Critique*, (Oxford and Cambridge: Polity Press and Blackwell, 1987), p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 214.

women to achieve agency and selfhood. However, it is deeply problematic to assume, as she does, that these objectives of autonomy and unified selfhood should be, or could be, the core objectives of a feminist movement, particularly in the light of the disintegration of the second wave movement and the diversification of feminist theory. But Benhabib is highly suspicious of those who criticise identity politics. She believes its detractors undermine autonomous subjectivity and fail to realise that 'social criticism of the kind required for women's struggles is not even possible without positing the legal, moral and political norms of autonomy, choice and self-determination'.<sup>47</sup> To this end, Benhabib argues first for an integrated theory of, 'women's oppression across history, culture and societies' and second, for a utopian ideal of 'new modes of togetherness, of relating to ourselves and to nature in the future'.<sup>48</sup>

#### *An 'integrated theory of oppression'*

The starting point for her continuing support for identity politics is her belief that women are determined by an all-pervasive 'gender-sex' system. This system, according to Benhabib, 'is not a contingent but an essential way in which social reality is organised, symbolically divided and lived through experientially'.<sup>49</sup> Women's sense of selfhood is affected by this system in two ways. First, it leaves women and their experiences privatised so that important elements in women's selfhood such as their greater concern for the care of others are undermined or ignored by dominant views of the self. Second, because women's selfhood is privatised, women are left to be defined publicly by others. To be defined by others on Benhabib's reading is to lack autonomy and so women become defined by dominant, modern discourses in terms of this lack, further restricting their actions.<sup>50</sup> Given the essential nature of the 'gender-sex' system, and women's common subordination under it, her idea of an 'integrated theory of oppression' appears viable. For Benhabib, this theory should be

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 151-152.



unmistakably universalist, having both cross and intra-cultural application.<sup>51</sup> Such a theory, she argues, would then provide the moral and political imperative for a solidaristic feminist movement.

The analysis of Chapters One and Two, however, questions whether this model of feminist theory and feminist movement politics is possible in the light of the fragmentation of the second wave. Not only does this level of fragmentation mitigate against an integrated feminist theory, it also casts doubt on the validity of the concept of universal oppression. Fragmentation has indicated that women and feminists are socially diverse, with different social positions and problems. To suggest moreover that after two periods of movement politics all women lack a sense of agency is to miss the theoretical boat, so to speak. Indeed, it is not even clear that increasing women's sense of autonomy and agency necessarily brings about emancipatory gains in equality. Vicki Randall and Joni Lovenduski refute this idea by citing the distinction Esther Breitenbach makes between autonomy and equality. Hence, they suggest that while Western women's *autonomy* to make decisions about their lives may have increased, their *equality* with men is still compromised.<sup>52</sup> On these terms, increased autonomy does not necessarily end subordination. Benhabib therefore needs to do more to show that it is autonomy that women lack as opposed to more practical demands of equality. Furthermore, Benhabib should realise that enhancing the autonomy of women is not a straightforward universal objective. It too is open to the vacillations of women's differences in class, ethnicity, religion etc. Thus, for example, increasing the autonomy of educated, middle class women may see an increase in the exploitation of poorer women as domestic and childcare workers.<sup>53</sup>

*'New modes of togetherness': a return to essentialism?*

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>52</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics: Women and Power in Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> To avoid these sorts of accusations, Benhabib needs to give a clearer account of the objectives of feminism and to explicitly examine the concept of equality rather than assuming, as she does at the

Benhabib believes that an important part of the quest for autonomy is the creation of an inclusive political sphere to enable the formation of new solidaristic bonds. She argues therefore that,

furthering one's capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within a solidaristic community that sustains one's identity through listening to one, and allowing one to listen to others, with respect within the many webs of interlocution that constitute our lives.<sup>54</sup>

She believes that feminism has been crucial in establishing this type of political framework. According to Benhabib, feminists of the late second wave have modified democratic models by emphasising, 'embodiedness, intersubjectivity, caring, empathy, sexuality and desire'.<sup>55</sup>

In this account of the relationship between feminism and democracy, Benhabib once again uses feminism as a 'corrective'<sup>56</sup> for the modern tradition and ends up generalising the feminist position itself as excessively gynocentric. Not only does this position ignore the conflict and fragmentation that has characterised feminism during the second wave, and more recently, but it also leaves her own rather humanistic call for women's autonomy without precedent in recent feminist theory. Hence, according to Benhabib, feminism as a discourse becomes a way to revalue citizenship in a more inclusive way. For women it becomes a route to citizenship and to the dividends that this inclusion will bring in terms of autonomous identity. In other words, for women, the feminist identity in the deliberative model is synonymous with their general quest *as citizens* for autonomous selfhood.

### **Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy: issues of inclusion and exclusion**

Benhabib has been instrumental in modifying the Habermasian view of deliberative democracy. She wants to ensure that the free and unconstrained public debate the

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moment, that increasing women's agency and autonomy will necessarily lead to an increase in their equality.

<sup>54</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Sexual Difference and Collective identities: The New Global Constellation,' op.cit., p. 350.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 338.



model rests on is properly open to marginalised groups such as women. For Benhabib postmodern and feminist critiques have been crucial in this process. As she states,

we must have the right to become members of a polity, and the rules of entry into a polity must be fair and in accordance with human dignity. To achieve this, we must indeed renegotiate the normativity of the 'logocentric polity.' The feminist theorist at present is one of the brokers in this complex renegotiation of sexual difference and new collective identities.<sup>57</sup>

Hence, Benhabib opens up the deliberative model to value pluralism to reject its emphasis on the search for consensus and, even, to undermine its status as a regulative, utopian ideal. Once the polity has been made accessible to marginalised groups, Benhabib believes that the deliberative political process can establish three things. One, it legitimises society and its political institutions.<sup>58</sup> Two, it fosters collective identity and solidaristic bonds in the polity.<sup>59</sup> Three, it allows individuals and groups to feel a sense of affirmation, agency and efficacy through political participation, this in turn consolidates the legitimacy and solidaristic nature of the polity.<sup>60</sup> To secure these political goods, her model is thus given a threefold basis consisting of discourse theory, liberal-proceduralism and agonal democracy. It is possible to address these three aspects of her model before considering whether her revised model of deliberative democracy successfully accommodates women as both feminists and citizens.

### *Discourse theory in deliberative democracy: legitimacy and collective identity*

Benhabib continues to ground the model in Habermasian discourse ethics because she believes that public deliberation is essential to democratic societies that aim for 'free

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<sup>56</sup> K. Hutchings, 'Moral deliberation and Political Judgement: Reflections on Benhabib's Interactive Universalism,' *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (1997), p. 134.

<sup>57</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Sexual Difference and Collective identities: The New Global Constellation,' op.cit., p. 357.

<sup>58</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy,' op.cit., p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Sexual Difference and Collective identities: The New Global Constellation,' op.cit., p. 357.

<sup>60</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 81.

and unconstrained public deliberation of all about matters of common concern'.<sup>61</sup> For this free and unconstrained deliberation to take place and to be truly inclusive, Benhabib stipulates a number of discursive guidelines drawn from discourse ethics. These principles allow every citizen in a democratic community to start a debating process, to change or introduce any topics to the debating agenda, to question the procedures that govern debates, and to challenge the outcome of any debate.<sup>62</sup> However, she believes that these guidelines need modifying to ensure that the public process of political deliberation is properly accessible to marginalised groups and not just disembodied, 'rational' individuals.<sup>63</sup>

In this revised model the aims of deliberation are both political and moral. Indeed, Benhabib makes few substantive distinctions between the two. Politically the open process of debate allows agreement to be reached on common, civil concerns. Morally, the model hopes to transform social relations by allowing diverse and marginalised groups to confront each other and hear each other with respect and mutual concern. Moreover, in the course of this confrontation Benhabib believes that each group and individual is able to develop a coherent set of political demands and a sense of political efficacy, both of which will facilitate the process of identity formation and narrative unity.<sup>64</sup>

For the debate to proceed in this manner and be truly accessible, all actors must be sympathetic to those they may not agree with. They must be prepared to at least listen to the viewpoints of others and at most defer to the better argument. To secure this type of public relationship, she argues that those relations of care that are normally reserved for private interaction must be allowed to infuse the public sphere. For Benhabib relations of care balance the modern excessive emphasis on the 'generalized other', the viewpoint of the objective, rights-bearing fellow human, with

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<sup>61</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,' in S. Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1996), p. 68.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>63</sup> S. Benhabib, 'The Democratic Moment and the Problem of Difference,' in S. Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference*, op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,' op.cit., p. 72.



the viewpoint of the 'concrete other' - the particularistic nature of each other's identities. As Benhabib writes 'in treating you in accordance with the norms of friendship, love and care, I confirm not only your *humanity* but your human individuality...the corresponding moral feelings are those of love, care, sympathy and solidarity'.<sup>65</sup> It is through care and respect that public actors can confront otherness and see both its place in universal humanity and its particularity, bringing her concept of 'interactive universalism' into the public-political sphere. In this way, social and political debates can accommodate otherness and still appeal to some form of universalist thinking with which to settle political questions.

However, there are several problems with using even a revised discourse theory as a model for political deliberation. While such sympathy might be found in moral and social deliberation, political deliberation is characterised by power relations and conflict. Political deliberation takes place between people who may have nothing more in common than the fact that they must co-exist as citizens in the same state. It would thus seem that there is nothing to guarantee the relations of sympathy and understanding that are essential for the deliberative process to be inclusive.<sup>66</sup> The only way to guarantee these relations would be, as Kimberly Hutchings argues, for Benhabib to privilege their 'generalized' relationships as citizens over their particularistic, 'concrete' identities so that any conflicts can be resolved by recourse to universal principles and procedures.<sup>67</sup> However, as it was argued above, Benhabib wants to balance universality with particularity, not privilege one over the other. She only specifies universal procedures as minimal criteria for inclusion; the universal procedures govern the *conditions* and not the *outcome* of her political model. Thus, Benhabib is left to make no more than a leap of faith that her public process of confronting otherness and particularity will necessarily bring about conflict resolution and decision.

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<sup>65</sup> S. Benhabib, S. Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory,' op.cit., p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> I accept that it might be possible to secure a procedurally inclusive process of deliberation but not that this will be transformative or solidaristic.

Another problem with her reworking of discourse ethics to include relations of care is that it leads to a general confusion in Benhabib's work about what should be the proper objectives of political discourse. Jean Cohen argues that it is a common feature of the deliberative models to conflate the objectives of the democratic process so that there is '[a] lack of differentiation between the analytic levels of normative justification, the empirical practices of deliberation, and a politics capable of generating binding decisions'.<sup>68</sup> Cohen believes that these three things cannot be combined in any single public process because the actual empirical practise of recognising all groups does not always create the best conditions for political decision-making. That is to say the more inclusive the political sphere becomes, the more protracted and unwieldy are its debates. For Cohen, moreover, using the public process of deliberation for identity affirmation and recognition is potentially problematic. It tends to squeeze out the private sphere, leaving subjects to seek self-affirmation in an exhaustive and open public debate. Consequently, Cohen wants to maintain a public/private distinction between the different objectives of deliberation, and she concludes that 'some of the fundamental preconditions for building and defending different, unique identities will depend on maintaining the necessary political and legal protections of privacy'.<sup>69</sup> Hence, by expanding the objectives of political deliberation to involve identity formation and recognition, Benhabib's deliberative model undermines the private sphere and, as Cohen indicates, neglects the important and protective role this sphere plays in identity formation. The latter is often destroyed by the harsh processes of politics.

The third problem with her use of discourse theory is that she fails to explicitly outline the way in which, according to its precepts, political decisions are made. Benhabib is aware that it will be difficult to reach political consensus in diverse Western democracies, stating, 'the challenge to democratic rationality is to arrive at

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<sup>67</sup> K. Hutchings, 'Moral deliberation and Political Judgement: Reflections on Benhabib's Interactive Universalism,' *op.cit.*, p. 137

<sup>68</sup> J. Cohen, 'Democracy, Difference, and the Right of Privacy,' in S. Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, *op.cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.



acceptable formulations of the common good despite this inevitable value-pluralism'.<sup>70</sup> However, she does not conceive that such value-pluralism might make any formulation of the common good impossible. Indeed, many theorists of value-pluralism would see this as an antithetical statement because they believe that value-pluralism replaces the idea of the 'common good' with a number of valid but incommensurable visions of the good life.<sup>71</sup> John Gray describes the theory of value-pluralism as necessarily entailing a commitment to incommensurability, arguing that it is,

an irreducible diversity of ultimate values (goods, excellences, options, reasons for action and so forth) and that when these values come into conflict or competition with one another there is no overarching standard or principle...whereby such conflicts can be arbitrated or resolved.<sup>72</sup>

In these circumstances political decisions will need to be governed by negotiation and compromise with some groups losing out.

But compromise is not enough for Benhabib. She expressly separates the decisions made in the deliberative democratic process from those based on compromise:

For what distinguishes discourses from compromises and other agreements reached under conditions of coercion is that only the *freely given assent of all concerned* can count as a condition of having reached agreement in the discourse situation (Benhabib's italics).<sup>73</sup>

This type of agreement, characterised by the 'assent of all', stands as a surprising vindication of consensus decision-making. As Kimberly Hutchings confirms, 'Benhabib's argument is haunted by the idea of the possibility of resolving moral and

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<sup>70</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,' op.cit., p. 73.

<sup>71</sup> There is a wider philosophic debate as to whether value-pluralism always amounts to incommensurability, see John Gray's discussion of this in his chapter on 'Pluralism' in J. Gray, *Berlin* (London: FontanaPress, 1995), pp. 38-75. Here Gray outlines how in its most political usage by agnostic liberals, such as Berlin, the two are seen to be synonymous. Indeed, Benhabib appears to be responding to such a view of value-pluralism in her own work or in what sense would value-pluralism be a 'challenge' to 'democratic rationality' as she suggests? If value-pluralism did not suggest incommensurability, then surely the political task would be a relatively simple one of merging and ordering values that appeared to be plural but actually had a common root.

<sup>72</sup> J. Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, op.cit, pp. 68-69.

<sup>73</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,' op.cit., p. 79.

political questions'.<sup>74</sup> It is thus necessary to question the extent to which Benhabib's endorsement of value-pluralism has any substantive impact on her political model. If value-pluralism is taken seriously, then surely the search for political consensus becomes invalid. On the other hand, if value-pluralism does not hinder the 'assent of all' to political decisions, it is hardly a 'challenge' to her deliberative model.

*Liberal proceduralism in deliberative democracy: legitimising deliberative democracy*

The proceduralist features of Benhabib's model do little to redress the problems of discourse ethics in indicating how political decisions might be made. She turns to proceduralism because she believes that 'one needs principles, institutions and procedures to enable articulation of the voice of 'others'''.<sup>75</sup> Benhabib argues that her appropriation of procedures differs from the work of liberal-proceduralists, such as Bruce Ackerman, because it uses them to open up the public space to group concerns. In contrast, according to Benhabib, liberal-proceduralists theorise procedures that maintain the neutrality of the political-public sphere by actively excluding 'difficult' subjects and groups from the discourse agenda in favour of judicial, abstract and conflict free politics.<sup>76</sup>

Hence, she insists that the procedures in her model should reflect the principles of her revised discourse theory, making the political sphere accessible to marginalised groups. All procedures must thus ensure 'universal moral respect' and 'egalitarian reciprocity' among participants in the political process. These entrench the right to similar treatment so that you treat those in the process as you would wish to be treated, and they also ensure equal rights vis-à-vis speaking in and initiating discussion.<sup>77</sup> These rights are grounded in the procedure itself and have no foundationalist basis; they stand as both the conditions of a procedure-based

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<sup>74</sup> K. Hutchings, 'Moral deliberation and Political Judgement: Reflections on Benhabib's Interactive Universalism,' op.cit., p. 141.

<sup>75</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 168.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 96-101.

<sup>77</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,' op.cit., p. 78.



deliberation process and the outcome of this process.<sup>78</sup> Further, they have no validity beyond the particular discussion process happening at any one time and can always be revised in the course of future discussions.

The problem is not that Benhabib identifies procedures, but that these procedures cease to be 'minimal criteria of validity' necessary for a value-pluralistic society. In her argument, procedures become another part of her moral aim to achieve a 'good' political practice based on care and sympathy and in which consensus can be achieved. Hence, she notes how deliberative procedures hope to increase the relevant social information for political decision-making, allow public actors to present and justify their views to others, thus self-reflecting on the validity of their ideas, and to face differences of opinion in the political process such that, 'individuals become more aware of such conflicts and feel compelled to undertake a coherent ordering [of their beliefs and concerns]'.<sup>79</sup> The latter points to a wider problem in Benhabib's work on democracy is thus that she wants to be seen to be responsive to postmodern and postmetaphysical discourse and thus she embraces value pluralism, non-foundationalism and even removes the utopianism of her earlier work. However she does not want to carry through what these discourses mean for her view of politics. In other words, she wants to embrace diversity, but avoid any of the incommensurable and irresolvable political conflict this may bring. As Carol Gould points out, of deliberative models in general, 'diversity may be the original condition of a polyvocal discourse but univocity is its normative principle'.<sup>80</sup> In short, deliberative models seek out 'one voice', a common good.

Stuart Hampshire, by contrast, suggests that minimal procedures of justice in a pluralistic society need to reflect differences and allow conflicts to be managed. As he states, 'we should look in society not for consensus, but for ineliminable and acceptable conflicts, and for rationally controlled hostilities'.<sup>81</sup> The most these

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>79</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy,' op.cit., p. 32.

<sup>80</sup> C. Gould, 'Diversity and Democracy: Representing Differences,' in S. Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference*, op.cit., p. 172.

<sup>81</sup> S. Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 189.

minimal criteria can do, for Hampshire, is ensure the emergence of conditions for compromise and acknowledge that, because of ineliminable conflicts, such decisions will not meet with consensus or the 'assent of all'. The procedures Benhabib endorses seem well suited for this purpose of generating legitimate outcomes, if only they were uncoupled from her quest for social transformation. After all, her procedures are designed to get previously excluded groups into political spaces and get them heard. But Benhabib's intent to tie proceduralism to her discursive quest for relations of mutual sympathy and better understanding continue to substantiate her procedures as ethical tools, rather than discursive guidelines. Hence, Benhabib's neglect of political conflict is as much a result of her belief that the deliberative model will be transformative, as it is a result of misunderstanding the nature of value-pluralism. Thus her quest for transformation must be considered in relation to her view of agonal ethics.

*The spirit of agonism in deliberative democracy: revitalising public life*

Even when Benhabib introduces elements of the agonal model into her vision of deliberative democracy, she does not do so to acknowledge conflict but to further her moral hope that citizens will understand each other better in a process of public deliberation. Her belief that 'politics is about something other than "neutrality",'<sup>82</sup> leads her to introduce Hanna Arendt's agonal emphasis on political activism and passion into her view of deliberative democracy. For Benhabib, Arendt is attuned to the 'contestatory, rhetorical, affective, impassioned elements of public discourse, with all their excesses and virtues'.<sup>83</sup> She wants these ideas to be used to flesh out the rather stolid process of debate envisioned by liberal-proceduralists. With these elements on board, she envisions her model as 'a deliberative vision of democratic politics which can also do justice to the agonistic spirit of democracy'.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 99.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>84</sup> S. Benhabib, 'The Democratic Moment,' op.cit., p. 9.



In such a democracy, she argues, political actors cease to be neutral and disembodied, and become concrete, embodied actors with gender, religious and ethnic identities. Political participation takes on a new meaning with citizens entering the public sphere to achieve a sense of affirmation, agency and efficacy. As Benhabib says, 'individuals face each other neither as pure legal subjects nor as moral agents standing under ties of ethical obligations but as public agents in a political space'.<sup>85</sup> When public actors are able to confront each other in this manner, in all their diversity, they are able to understand the perspective of others and increase social solidarity. Benhabib sums up this development of greater understanding thus, 'perhaps the most valuable outcome of such authentic processes of public dialogue...is that when and if they occur, such public conversations result in the cultivation of the faculty of judgement and the formation of an 'enlarged mentality''.<sup>86</sup> 'Enlarged mentality' is achieved when the public actor combines her universal perspective with a respect for diversity. In other words, it means that while all public actors share a citizen identity in the public space, they also legitimately hold different cultural identities.

However, it is hard to understand how this public confrontation of citizens will actually result in 'enlarged mentality'. What is to stop, in diverse societies, more negative mindsets emerging, governed by fear, anxiety and anger? Marginalised groups, especially, may feel many of these more negative emotions, particularly if they have struggled hard to be heard and included. Similarly for every person who transforms their particular perspective because they defer to the better argument, benefit from the increased social information or realise previously unseen similarities with others in the debate, there will surely be one person who finds his or her views are confirmed in the deliberative process. But Benhabib does not acknowledge these possibilities because in her account public actors in the deliberative model may confront each other's diversity, but they never run into any serious conflict. Instead, this confrontation results in the almost revelatory and redemptive process of 'enlarged

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<sup>85</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 140.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

mentality' in which the transformation of viewpoints, brought about by confrontation, only furthers understanding between participants.

At root, Benhabib's introduction of the Arendtian agonal model of democracy does not fulfil its intended function of introducing diversity and conflict to the discourse model. This failure is because, as Hutchings notes, Arendt's model is itself rooted in Kantian universalism such that,

the acknowledgement of difference in any concrete or fundamental sense is marginalised...and the fact of human plurality gains its force not from the recognition of concrete otherness [as Benhabib would assume] but from the regulative ideas of pure reason.<sup>87</sup>

Hence, for Benhabib, as for Arendt, it does not matter if citizens are embodied, passionate actors - one of the reasons she turns to the agonal model - because the Arendtian version submits them to 'the regulative ideas of pure reason'. Ultimately, Benhabib would appear to endorse Arendt's denial of pre-constituted interest claims, citing with approval the latter's view of "enlarged thought" as 'an *anticipated* communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement' (my italics).<sup>88</sup> In other words, Benhabib, like Arendt, sees public reasoning as the attempt to find agreement, with this attempt transforming any pre-political interests or demands even before they reach the public sphere of discussion. This seems a remarkably rational process, far removed from the 'impassioned' and 'contestatory' contributions of agonal politics.

Consequently, in the model of deliberative democracy it is the public process of deliberation that is meant to enable the citizen to formulate her political concerns once he or she has confronted all the relevant parties, heard all the arguments and then decided which argument will best address common problems and not her own cultural values. Politics becomes a 'wait-and-see' process that could exclude differences, just as easily as the liberal norms of neutrality Benhabib herself objects to, by forcing participants to undermine the specificity of their interests in favour of the force of deliberative opinion and, ultimately, the common good. As Benhabib herself notes,

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<sup>87</sup> K. Hutchings, 'Moral deliberation and Political Judgement: Reflections on Benhabib's Interactive Universalism,' *op.cit.*, p. 138.



'the formation of coherent preferences cannot precede deliberation; it can only succeed it'.<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, both the deliberative democratic model and the Arendtian model of agonal democracy undermine the impact of agon and conflict in democracy. The result is that public actors might be embodied, but this is never substantial enough to resist transformation in the deliberative process.

Thus, Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy has three general problems. Firstly, it introduces discourse ethics to create a transformative deliberative process that continues to seek political consensus and denies the specific nature of political decision-making. Secondly, the model is predicated on value-pluralism but does not seriously acknowledge that incommensurable conflicts of values could thus arise, ruling out the possibility of a transformative political process. Thirdly, it is not clear that the Arendtian agonal model opens up the deliberative model to diversity, given that it is still premised on transformative and universal principles. It is now possible to draw some specific conclusions about her model and whether it allows women to be politically present as both citizens and as feminists.

### **Feminists in deliberative democracy: into a new wave?**

Three problems emerge with Benhabib's reconciliation of feminism and democratic citizenship, relating to both her view of feminism and her model of deliberative democracy. Firstly, her premise of unmodified identity politics leaves women in the same theoretical position they found themselves in the second wave, and as such does not allow them to make substantive political demands as feminists. Secondly, she gives politics a moral status and does not therefore understand that a properly political process of deliberation may not secure women's sense of autonomous selfhood, but may actually undermine it. Thirdly, given that she views feminism purely as a quest for women's autonomous agency as citizens, the citizen identity is privileged over the feminist one for women. Consequently, in the deliberative model women have to be citizens first and feminists second.

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<sup>89</sup> Cited in S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 137.

### *Identity politics*

Given that identity formation remains the political impetus of feminism, women on her analysis participate in politics to secure selfhood and agency as opposed to concrete political demands. The latter are only vicariously achieved once women are political actors. Indeed, Benhabib believes that all finalised political demands must be the *result* of participation in a fair and inclusive deliberative process.<sup>90</sup> Demands cannot be known or made in any substantive way before this debate takes place. This stipulation effectively prevents feminists from formulating their political claims before entry into the political sphere.<sup>91</sup> Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy moreover conceives of the process of debate as an attempt to reach common decisions as citizens.<sup>92</sup> It becomes difficult therefore to understand at which point women could formulate their demands as feminists, as opposed to women seeking citizenship.

She further undermines the specificity of women political demands as feminists by continuing second wave identity politics. Feminist politics for Benhabib, like her model of deliberative democracy more generally, remains a quest for humanistic identity affirmation and recognition. It is about enabling citizens to be autonomous in their political and moral deliberations and this, she argues, is particularly important for women who have been denied autonomous selfhood. Political processes in societies characterised by value-pluralism cannot secure identity affirmation in this manner. In these societies the political, as is argued in more detail in Chapter Five, becomes a process in which citizens confront those who are different to them but with whom they must co-exist in a polity. This process is often difficult and conflictual and thus is not an ideal space for identity formation. It should also not be assumed that the mere fact of inclusion will ensure feminists' demands are heard or,

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<sup>89</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Deliberative Rationality and Models of Democratic Legitimacy,' *op.cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>90</sup> Benhabib *Situating the Self*, *op.cit.*, p. 81-82, cites with approval the communitarian and the critical theory emphasis on participation and the benefits this will bring in 'revitalising' public life and increasing the citizen's sense of 'efficacy' and 'agency'.

<sup>91</sup> In the Chapter Six, I discuss the need to promote an autonomous feminist alliance to allow feminists to formulate their demands before they enter into the mainstream political process. This stops co-option and allows feminists to confront each other in their specificity.



as is shown earlier in this chapter, that because women have more autonomy to politically decide their identities they have greater equality with men. Women as feminists must be able to enter the political sphere (wherever this may be) in their specificity, to make concrete demands and to acknowledge that they have substantive interests because they have previously been marginalised. Hence, feminists may have wider concerns than a desire for citizenship.

### *Conflating the moral and the political*

Part of the difficulty Benhabib has in allowing women to formulate political demands as feminists is that she makes no substantive distinction between moral, social and political deliberation. She believes distinguishing between moral and political deliberation curtails the deliberative agenda and excludes certain topics from the discussion process.<sup>93</sup> In failing to make these distinctions, however, she denies the specificity of political deliberation that makes it separate to, though not wholly distinct from, social and moral deliberation. Thus, politics on her reading becomes a moral process of identity formation. This view of politics gives rise to a number of dangerous assumptions. Firstly, she assumes that politics, if it is properly inclusive, can be governed by relations of care. It is secondly presupposed that this inclusive process will radically transform how citizens treat, and listen to, each other in public. Thirdly, she believes that such a transformation will feed back into the citizen's feeling of narrative unity and identity formation.

Consequently she creates an unrealistic and exhaustive picture of the political as a moral process guided by transformative relations of care and solidarity. Stephen White recognises that she emphasises relations of care in the deliberative process to ensure that all participants treat previously excluded issues with sympathy, but warns that the care we associate with close and personal relationships is not always appropriate to public discussion:

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<sup>92</sup> S. Benhabib, 'Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy,' op.cit., p. 68.

<sup>93</sup> S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, op.cit., p. 99-100.

When she endorses the standpoint of the concrete other as adopted in intimate relationships, she implicitly accepts the intensity of care and mutual expectation that is typical of such relationships. When that intensity is joined to her anticipatory-utopian orientation, one is hard pressed not to envision a society in which the bonds of community may be tied extremely tightly.<sup>94</sup>

In other words, by making politics a moral quest for transformative social relations, Benhabib's model is in danger of becoming authoritarian, leaving every individual identity to be subjected to and validated by public scrutiny. It does not help feminists at all by leaving them to settle important questions about their objectives in an exhaustive and wide political process.

### *Privileging the citizen identity*

Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy therefore is ultimately Rousseauian. It assumes that individuals can subsume their particularistic identities in favour of collectively generated citizen concerns. Hence, women in her model may participate in deliberative democracy as impassioned and embodied individuals, even as individuals who bring in new relationships of care and concern, but they cannot enter the process with a set of concrete demands and interests. Benhabib does not specify women's distinct concerns as feminists in deliberative democracy because she continues to conceive of feminism as a quest for selfhood and identity, a quest that is to be fulfilled by her model of politics.

She thus fails to understand the great diversity of women's and feminists views of selfhood that have emerged during and since the fragmentation of the second wave movement, theorising universalist concepts of autonomy and oppression and expecting them to encapsulate the social status of all women. Ironically, Benhabib criticises theorists such as Rawls, Kant and Hegel for assuming that when the self faces the other it confronts someone who is 'just like oneself'.<sup>95</sup> Yet, she assumes the same sort of social similarity in her political work on feminists, arguing that all women

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<sup>94</sup> S. K. White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 104.

<sup>95</sup> S. Benhabib, 'The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory,' *op.cit.*, p. 85.



share the same relations of oppression and all women need to strive for autonomous selfhood. It seems that when she confronts other women, she too assumes someone who is just like herself. By contrast, a new wave of feminism must now learn how to acknowledge the differences between women and to take these into account at the very moment that they also fight for women's inclusion in democratic politics. This makes the task of democratic inclusion more complicated, but it is too fundamental to ignore.

Ultimately it is hard to see what even a revised version of deliberative democracy has to offer marginalised groups such as feminists. At most, it offers inclusion into a deliberative process in which they must be prepared to revise their demands should they conflict with the common interests of all citizens. While it is easy to see that women can be citizens in Benhabib's model - they are theorised as a homogeneously oppressed group in need of inclusion - they cannot, on this reading, be feminists as well. It is also unclear how women could take in set demands as feminists, for example, demands for abortion rights, childcare, equal rights legislation, for fear that they will close off their ears to the demands of others. Hence, feminists appear to get stuck in the 'open process of argumentation' that never focuses their demands as feminist demands. As Carol Gould has recognised, this process is futile because, although 'decision without deliberation is blind, deliberation without decision is empty'.<sup>96</sup> In raising these issues it is not being suggested here that feminists should be rigid about their demands. It is simply to make the point clearly that women as *feminists* have practical interests needing political expression. Thus, Benhabib's model, as she has so far formulated it, is inadequate to deal with women as feminists. Political inclusion in itself will not end their marginalisation.

## Conclusion

Benhabib's version of deliberative democracy fails to include women as feminists as well as citizens. For all her attempts to reconcile deliberative democracy with value pluralism and conflict, she has not followed through the full implications of these for

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<sup>96</sup> C. Gould, 'Diversity and Democracy: Representing Differences,' op.cit., p. 176.

political processes. The central problem in her work is that she conceives politics as a moral quest for selfhood and greater understanding with others. It is not seen as a dimension of human relationships that deals with power relationships, conflict and competition. Thus, Benhabib eschews political compromise and incommensurability in favour of moral transformation and consensus decision-making. In this project she does not fully answer her own question of how political decisions can be made in the face of conflict brought about by value pluralism; these decisions may involve compromise or zero-sum losses to one party in the discussion.

Part of her problem in reconciling deliberative democracy with diversity and value-pluralism is that her model of deliberative democracy is also predicated on this assumption of universalism. Hence, although she amends the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy, in light of postmodern and feminist criticisms, she still privileges consensus decision-making and conflict-free politics. The implicit universalism of her political model ultimately undermines women's identities as feminists with specific political claims and interests. Instead she favours collective, citizen concerns. Women in her model are thus left to subordinate their feminist interests to their identity as citizens, an identity that is to bring them autonomy and agency.

Part of Benhabib's problem in moving feminism fully into the new wave is that she underestimates the impact of the postmodern critique on feminist politics. Her view of feminism rests on the universalistic assumption that all women strive for autonomous and unifying selfhood. She does not consider how this concept of autonomous selfhood is problematic as a unifying principle of feminist movement politics or, even, as was discussed earlier in the chapter, how the search for autonomy is not necessarily the same as the search for equality. It will be useful to contrast her position with Iris Young's view of communicative democracy, which has a better understanding of feminist politics after the second wave than Benhabib's work. While Young keeps the strengths of the model of deliberative model in getting women included and in getting them heard, she is far more aware than Benhabib of the



diversity of women's experiences and the resulting divergence in feminist theory. She also makes a greater distinction between the moral and social process of identity formation and the political process of deliberation. Thus, for Young, the political process takes place between participants who are strangers to each other. By assuming a political relationship of alterity and not of sympathy, Young pays greater attention to the specificity of women's demands, and to how universal rights for participation might need to be supplemented with concrete rights that are especially tailored for women and other marginalised groups.

## Chapter Four. Engaging Postmodernism: Feminism and Communicative Democracy in the Work of Iris Young

### Introduction

In Chapter Three it was suggested that Benhabib privileges a concept of autonomous selfhood and wants feminism to empower women to achieve this sense of selfhood in a deliberative model of democracy. However, by privileging this view of selfhood, her model is inadequate for feminists after fragmentation for two reasons. Firstly, it presupposes a unitary feminist movement concerned with autonomous subjectivity and, secondly, it forces women to favour their citizen identity in the public sphere at the expense of their feminist one. To overcome these problems it is useful to compare and contrast her work with that of Iris Young's model of 'communicative democracy'.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to Benhabib, Young is much more open to postmodern discourse at all levels of her political theory. She uses it as a critical strategy to challenge essentialist views of identity and to question universalistic concepts of justice and oppression. Consequently, she attempts to theorise an alliance-based feminist movement that is not underpinned by a concept of the universal oppression of women, and she reconceives a wider communicative political process that is open to otherness and difference. While her political model has its roots in a broadly deliberative model of democracy, she amends the Habermasian version and, like Benhabib, also combines it with the communitarian emphasis on recognising and affirming all social groups that make up a community. Young therefore advocates a number of practical political policies to ensure that the public sphere is accessible to marginalised social groups. These measures include giving excluded groups such as women funding to organise into political groups, and introducing new types of political language that encompass

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<sup>1</sup> Young has written a number of articles outlining her vision of communicative democracy but among the most useful is I. Young, 'Justice and Communicative Democracy,' in R. S. Gottlieb (ed.), *Radical Philosophy, Tradition, Counter-Tradition, Politics*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 123-143.



rhetorical and non-rational modes of speech. With these amendments, Young wants to create a public sphere that is open and accessible to marginalised groups, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of society.

The difficulty is that the more steps Young takes to encourage and *ensure* the participation and representation of diverse social groups, the more she institutionalises groups such as women. This institutionalisation risks re-essentialising women, denying the differences between them and tying them into a rigid political coalition. Judith Squires has summed up this sort of dilemma Young's work, stating that she is trying to work out 'how to develop a politics of identity which both recognises the precariousness of identity and its necessity'.<sup>2</sup> As yet, Young has not managed to find this balance in her democratic vision and she ends up with a political settlement that is the very reverse of Benhabib's. Whereas Benhabib could ensure women's democratic inclusion as citizens but could not ensure their status as feminists, Young's model is accessible to women as a fixed, feminist group but risks their broader democratic identity as citizens.

To explore the dilemmas in Young's work the following areas will be addressed. Young's engagement with postmodernism and the implications it has for her view of women's group identity as affinity and political groups will be examined in detail. The chapter will then consider how she develops the communicative model of democracy to recognise and represent such marginalised affinity groups, before discussing the criticisms of essentialism and institutionalisation of difference this political settlement has faced. It is to be recognised, however, that Young has attempted to respond to these criticisms of essentialism. In a recent piece on feminism she restates the anti-essentialist basis of feminist collectivity, using Sartre's concept of 'serial collectivity'.<sup>3</sup> In a serial group women need have nothing more in common than a shared material status, if they are to form a political group. She also recognises

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<sup>2</sup> J. Squires, 'Liberal Constitutionalism, Identity and Difference,' *Political Studies*, Vol. XLIV, (1996), p. 627.

<sup>3</sup> I. Young, 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking About Women as a Social Collective,' in L. Nicholson and S. Seidman (eds.), *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 187-215.

that women often form issue-based political groups as opposed to solidaristic, identity-based groups. Hence, before coming to a conclusion, her view of serial group identity needs consideration. Given that she still bases her democratic model on affinity group representation, and not the representation of groups based on the series, it would be useful therefore to conclude with a speculative account of the implications of serial collectivity for women in her model of communicative democracy. This account will develop what her idea of serial collectivity might mean for women's democratic inclusion as feminists and as citizens.

### **Engaging postmodernism and the question of identity**

If Seyla Benhabib's appropriation of postmodern theories was best described as a 'dialogue', Young's endorsement has been more enthusiastic and could be termed 'engagement'. Young believes that postmodern and poststructuralist discourses have particularly strong application in understanding both the existence of social difference and its inescapability. For Young, these discourses also usefully question universalistic discourses and concepts. In her account, therefore, postmodern thought can be used to pluralise concepts of modern thought such as impartiality, justice and oppression, recognising their contingent bases in particular social conditions.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Young reconceives existing political models in terms of its emphasis on the contingency of political thought, its vision of anti-essentialistic identity, and its political anti-utopianism. Her engagement with postmodernism now needs to be examined in detail.

### *The critique of the 'logic of identity' and universal theory*

Young's concern with identity is rooted in postmodern theory. She believes, citing the postmodern thinkers Mouffe and Laclau, that many traditions of Western thought are based on a 'logic of identity' that produces unity and universality in concepts of selfhood, theory and society. The theorist who follows the 'logic of identity' attempts



to make diverse historical and social events intelligible by reducing them all to a single principle or a universal law.<sup>5</sup> The theorist seeks out such universality because she or he wants to make the complexity of these events ordered and certain.

Young thus engages Derrida and Irigaray's criticisms of this logic to illustrate its dangerous implications for social difference. On these terms the theorist who follows the 'logic of identity' can only respond to difference by excluding or assimilating it. In *excluding* difference the theorist constructs it as 'Other'- as a completely alien concept – and dismisses it.<sup>6</sup> A relevant example of this process is the way in which dominant traditions of thought have treated women. These traditions, if Young's argument is applied, excluded women by defining them as everything that men were not.<sup>7</sup> When the 'logic of identity' attempts to *assimilate* social difference, usually in the benign hope of erasing the conflict brought about by diversity, it still ends up excluding the specificity of the difference. As Young writes of assimilation, 'it inevitably generates dichotomy instead of unity, because the move to bring particulars under a universal category creates a distinction between inside and outside'.<sup>8</sup> According to Young, the result of such dichotomising, like the cruder process of exclusion, is that it 'turns the merely different into the absolutely other'.<sup>9</sup>

Postmodern discourses have criticised this 'logic of identity' - the logic behind the quest for unity and sameness that has characterised the modern tradition of thought - problematising the philosophic dichotomising and universalistic political projects the logic produces. Young argues that in the light of the postmodern critique the philosopher should no longer assume that he is representative of those he philosophises for, warning,

Those articulating and following the ideas of modern reason were white bourgeois men. In articulating their visual metaphors of reason

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<sup>4</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Young details how women are constructed as 'Other' in *Justice and the politics of Difference*, *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

they spoke for themselves, unmindful that there might be other positions to articulate.<sup>10</sup>

Instead, Young wants all theorists to consider how their discourses have been informed by their own social status. She demands not the end of philosophy but the acknowledgement that a philosopher's view is one perspective on theory. For Young the theorist is not an autonomous observer of social processes but is situated in a complex social world that pre-exists her and escapes her full understanding.

By being cognisant of his or her own social position, the theorist is then able to recognise wider social difference. Consequently, Young envisions a Foucauldian pluralisation of philosophical concepts taking place as concepts such as justice, impartiality and oppression are re-formulated in socially contextual ways. According to Young, they will no longer indicate a universal state of being, but will account for how different groups and individuals are affected at different times by injustice and subjectification, and the different ways in which they experience these relationships.

Indeed, Young argues that it is not possible to create a universal theory of oppression because there are different ways to experience oppression from outright abuse and violence to more hidden means of subordination and exploitation.<sup>11</sup> Hierarchically ordering these forms of oppression is exceedingly risky. It means replicating the 'logic of identity' and denying differences of experience. Hence, the theorist must take account of these differences and describe relations of oppression as they manifest themselves in every social circumstance. As she writes,

causal explanation [of oppression] must always be particular and historical. Thus an explanatory account of why a particular group is oppressed in the ways that it is must trace the history and current structure of particular social relations.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, Young reconceives the universalistic and foundationalist theory of oppression as a contingent, plural and flexible. In theorising oppression in such a manner, she, as a theorist, avoids the dangerous 'logic of identity' and remains attuned to heterogeneity and social difference.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 53-63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 65.



### *Engaging postmodernism: social difference and anti-essentialism*

The logic of identity, as is stated above, also pervades the modern concepts of selfhood and subjectivity. For Young this logic underpins the modern tradition's presumption of the autonomous and unified pre-social subject.<sup>13</sup> Young argues, by contrast, that the self is not a pre-social, autonomous unity because it is constituted by its social relationships with others. These social processes and relationships are themselves complex and contradictory and further decentre the subject by providing it with a range of identities and affiliations. She describes the process of identity formation thus:

In a complex, highly differentiated society like our own, all persons have multiple group identifications. The culture, perspective and relations of privilege and oppression of these various groups, moreover, may not cohere. Thus individual persons, as constituted partly by their group affinities and relations...themselves are heterogeneous and not necessarily coherent.<sup>14</sup>

In short, Young believes that the self finds self-definition through membership of one or more social groups. These groups can be based on ethnicity, religion, class or gender and some of them might overlap, However, the group identity can never 'centre' the self because no single group identity can fully determine or define it.

This idea of a decentred but social subjectivity can be contrasted with Seyla Benhabib's fears, outlined in Chapter Three, that the decentred self is incapable of relationships or agency.<sup>15</sup> Hence, whereas Benhabib saw decentred subjectivity as the antithesis of political agency and efficacy, Young believes that the differentiating and decentring gaze of 'others' - those who are not like oneself - can actually inspire political action and self-assertion. To support this point, Young uses the example of how black people and women have been able to 'maintain a sense of positive subjectivity' despite experiencing decentred subjectivity in the form of 'double consciousness'. 'Double consciousness' is a split in identity that oppressed groups feel when they are culturally excluded, but are still able to positively identify with other

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

members of their social group.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, these groups reclaimed their differential status from the dominant culture and revelled in their differences, going on to create alternative political spaces and methods.<sup>17</sup> In other words, their negative experiences of decentred subjectivity became the springboard for political action and assertion. Of course, as Chapter Two showed, there can be problems with this sort of self-assertion. It too can be essentialising and authoritarian towards difference. However, her work indicates how the experience of decentred subjectivity is no bar to subjects identifying with each other and forming political bonds. The exact nature of these bonds will be considered next.

### **Social and political groups: theorising relations of affinity**

Part of Young's postmodern attempt to theorise identity as non-essentialistic is to see the subject as a decentred product of its social relationships. In Young's work, identity formation is contingent upon membership of social groups. The subject in forming these bonds remains decentred because no single association can fully determine or constitute its identity. Young conceives of this social definition as both a passive and active process of identification. On the one hand, she believes that it is passive process because the subject is born into and finds itself in a number of social groups; it has no pre-social existence prior to social group membership. On the other hand, she also believes that the subject *actively* identifies and aligns with social groups. Thus, Young attempts to forge a path between the inescapable basis of social group membership that can feel constraining on the subject if they feel trapped by such categorisation, and the powerful desire to form common bonds and value social group membership that can be liberating and affirming of subjectivity. For Young, it is the latter desire, the active process of identification, which transforms the affinity group into a political group.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf., Chapter Three, p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 159.



### *'Thrownness' and the social group*

In terms of the inescapable nature of social group membership, Young has been strongly influenced by the continental tradition of existentialism. Hence, she argues that the subject always finds itself within a social group, or a set of social groups, and thus feels an uncontrollable, Heideggerian sense of 'thrownness', a feeling that the subject has no mastery over its social location. The subject moreover is also placed in social groups by others' perceptions of its social position and, again, it has no control over these.<sup>18</sup> However, unlike existentialists such as Sartre, Young does not believe that there is an authentic identity to be found beyond the subject's social interaction. The subject does not simply act out its social group roles under the guise of 'bad faith', but actively seeks out and values social group identity. So while the subject may have no choice in social group membership, in that everybody is a member of social groups, they also need them for affirmation and recognition. Indeed, the subject may consciously decide to identify and 'affine' with certain social groups and reject others.

### *The social group as affinity group*

Thus, while membership of a social group is to some extent uncontrollable, the social group is important for a subject's sense of self-identity and affirmation. The subject needs the recognition of its fellow members in the social group for its own sense of agency, as she puts it, 'groups...constitute individuals'.<sup>19</sup> When the subject explicitly chooses to identify with a social group - as opposed to having the group as an unconscious background to their life - it becomes a member of an 'affinity group'.

For Young the importance of the distinction between the 'affinity group' and the social group, is that the relationship of 'affinity' is a consciously chosen, non-essentialising form of self-definition and definition by others. To identify with a social group and feel affinity the subject does not necessarily have to share common social

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

characteristics with other members of the group. Rather, the affinity group, as Young states,

in a given social situation comprises those people with whom I feel the most comfortable, who are more familiar. Affinity names the manner of sharing assumptions...but not according to some common nature.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, the crucial factor in Young's concept of the affinity group is that it *recognises* but does not *determine* a subject's identity. The subject thus remains free to drift away from the group and to seek out many other identifications. Indeed, the subject's membership of the affinity group lasts only so long as they are actively identifying with it.

The non-essential basis of 'affinity group' membership leads to another important element in the structure of the affinity group. When the social group is conceived as an 'affinity group' it becomes a fluid, dynamic and flexible form of association. The subject in developing a relationship of affinity consciously chooses or accepts the group identity as a valid affirmation of their social identity. The group bonds can then be constructed as a social and political assertion of identity, taking on an emancipatory affect. For Young constructing the affinity group affirms and makes present group identities that are otherwise ignored, excluded or denigrated by dominant cultural processes. In her words, 'the assertion of a positive sense of group difference by these [affinity] groups is emancipatory because it reclaims the definition of the group by the group, as a creation and construction, rather than a given essence'.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the affinity group becomes a freely chosen, active process of identification, removing the social group from the realms of Heideggerian 'thrownness' and inescapability.

However, by tying the social group to identity assertion via the concept of affinity, she reintroduces the risk of essentialising group members. As it was quoted above, Young tries to conceive of the affinity group as non-essentialistic. It does not need to be based on common identity just a desire to be aligned with a particular group. However, once the group passes from a form of social bonding to a political

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 172.



unit of assertion and solidarity, the proviso that its members need not have a common identity becomes harder to maintain. The affinity group thus begins to become more substantial; it is not just about identification. Hence, according to her argument, it creates a sense of positive identity for its members and imposes on them a political structure. It now seems to demand deep bonds of solidarity to hold it together. As Young herself states, getting to the crux of the nature of affinity group bonds:

Members of social groups exhibit everyday affinities for one another in the sense that they tend to live and socialize together and often feel more comfortable with members of their group than others because they share culture, languages, practices and experiences that others do not understand firsthand.<sup>22</sup>

Seen in these terms, the affinity group is not just about 'sharing assumptions', it is a much deeper identification of shared culture and experience. Given this definition of affinity group relations, there is a question here of whether affinity group relations are really as fluid and undeterministic as Young has suggested.

Consequently, what emerges in her view of the social group as an affinity group is that it can be formulated in a very unitary and potentially essentialising manner. While not denying that these sorts of groups develop, they do not, as will be examined next, extend readily and easily to gender groups. Women are highly dispersed throughout societies and do not share common perspectives on even their most minimum gender-related identities, such as the ability to bear children. Moreover, it is not clear how this sort of group is different from the type of essentialistic identity group definitions that Young is trying to escape.

### *The 'affinity group' as a political group*

For Young the affinity group gathers form and life when it is also seen as a political group. Without political impetus, the affinity group would be a mere association of individuals, or a kind of theoretical social club. Hence, Young conceives the affinity group's transformation into a political group as an active process of owning, claiming and asserting identity. An affinity group is most likely to form and be spurred into

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

political action because its members realise that they are discriminated against *because* of their social identities. The group therefore is not 'founded' according to Young, nobody holds an inaugural meeting or sets out a founding constitution, its members instead become jointly conscious of their subordination, just as Jews in 1930s Germany realised their common status under Nazi oppression. As she writes, 'these people "discovered" themselves as Jews, and then formed a group identity and affinity with one another'.<sup>23</sup>

By naming their identity in this manner, groups are able to reclaim it and define it in their own terms. This is the locus of the emancipatory affect of the affinity group as a political group. Young states that in this process, 'oppressed, disadvantaged, or specially marked groups...organise autonomously and assert a positive sense of their cultural and experiential specificity'.<sup>24</sup> According to Young's account, women went through this process in the 1970s and 1980s, when they reclaimed their differential status and set about creating women-only spaces such as clinics, book stores and political forums.<sup>25</sup> They indicated in this action the importance of affinity groups organising *separately* as political groups before seeking wider political representation.<sup>26</sup> However, Young's view that second wave feminist groups are useful models for affinity groups is a surprising endorsement of very traditional identity politics. This sort of identity politics was criticised in Chapter Two because of its tendencies to essentialise differences; such that the very act of asserting cultural identities demanded the cohesion and ideological adherence of those involved. Again, it would seem that Young re-introduces the essentialising trends of identity politics to her vision of affinity groups. It is necessary therefore to consider the example of women in an affinity group in greater detail and look for this drift to essentialism.

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<sup>22</sup> I. Young, 'Justice and Communicative Democracy,' op.cit., p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 162.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 167.



## **Women, feminism and the concept of the 'affinity group': a return to the politics of identity?**

It is important to examine Young's concept of the 'affinity' group because it forms the basis of marginalised group's political representation in communicative democracy. The concept of the 'affinity group', as is shown above, has the potential to transform the social group into a political unit that can make demands, interest-claims, and calls for representation for these oppressed and marginalised social groups. However, once the affinity group becomes a political unit there are problems of determinism, fixity and essentialism in regard to individual members' identities. Moreover, in terms of women as an affinity group in Young's work, there is confusion as to whether the 'affinity group' is equivalent to a feminist group. At times she distinguishes between the two associations and at others she conflates them. Thus, it is necessary to examine the status of women in an affinity group, how the affinity group of women becomes a political group, and whether this political group of women is a feminist group.

### *Women as an affinity group*

For Young, the attractions of the affinity group for women are clear. They allow women a haven from their oppression, marginalisation and subordination, empowering them to find solidarity and self-respect.<sup>27</sup> The very things that are denied to groups who suffer oppression, because they are classified into groups, essentialised and then excluded. Hence, according to Young, it is necessary to reclassify the group identity in a way that maintains solidarity without being deterministic of its members' identities and furthering their oppression.<sup>28</sup> Thus, affinity groups allow women to come together in a non-essentialistic way. It is not an 'either/or' situation whereby a woman is either a member of the affinity group of women, or she is a member of, for example, the affinity group of black people. It is a politics of difference in which differences are

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<sup>27</sup> Young describes how oppressed groups are denied specificity and often denigrated as deviant and abnormal, *ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

fluid, interrelated and dynamic. As Young states, 'difference no longer implies that groups lie outside one another'<sup>29</sup> and thus there may be overlapping similarities among different groups. However, this non-essentialistic understanding of the group is lost as Young defines women's affinity group relationships in terms of the wider political process.

### *Women in the 'affinity group' as a political group*

Young, as is shown above, attempts to conceive the political group that comes from affinity, without homogenising its members. Thus, for Young the group is structured as a movement, reflecting the differences between the members of the group. Indeed, she even suggests that movements based on affinity groups should have separate sections within them for intra-group differences. For example, women would need to have separate sub-sections in their group for differences in religion, sexuality, ethnicity etc.<sup>30</sup> Although this assertion of internal group differences is an attempt by Young to eradicate the charge of essentialism, it leaves her original concept of the affinity group in difficulty. If this level of diversity exists within a group, how can an 'affinity group' be based on 'common history' and 'social status' as she has previously claimed? Furthermore, if the social group of women is so obviously socially dispersed in terms of religion, class and ethnicity, how can she identify a homogeneous, 'highly visible'<sup>31</sup> social group of women who could then form the basis of an affinity group?

Thus, to remain consistent with her anti-essentialist claims about the affinity group - that it does not depend on its members sharing a common nature - her theorisation of the affinity group loses shape. To be non-essentialistic it would have to take the form of a loose alliance in which issues of shared identity are much less important in group definition than her work indicates. However, Young is more likely to theorise the 'affinity group' of women as an homogeneous political unit than a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 44.



loose alliance, further undermining its status as a non-essentialistic, fluid collective. It is on this more substantial basis that women as an affinity group are given representation in her model of communicative democracy.

*Women as an affinity group and a feminist movement*

Young makes no distinction between the affinity group as a social group or as a political group. Indeed, it is the political impetus that can transform social groups into active affinity groups. What is harder to ascertain is whether on Young's reading women as an affinity group can be conflated with women in a feminist group. There is certainly a clear relationship between the two structures. According to Young, the experiences of the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s set a precedent for affinity group relationships. She argues that the feminist movement, along with other identity movements of the time, 'perfected the theory and practice of the "affinity group" which has become a model for democratic decisionmaking for subsequent protest movements'.<sup>32</sup> It was the positive process of group identification that made these movements good models for affinity groups.

However, despite these similarities, Young does go on to make a distinction between women as an affinity group and women as a feminist group. She designates the latter as an, 'ideological group...a collection of persons with shared political beliefs'.<sup>33</sup> While such a group may become a social group and vice versa, she explicitly states that, 'shared political or moral beliefs, even when they are deeply and passionately held, however, do not themselves constitute a social group'.<sup>34</sup> Here, Young is distinguishing between the social basis of an affinity group and the moral and political basis of an ideological group. The fact she makes this distinction again compounds the view, already stated, that Young has an essentialistic, identitarian vision of the affinity group. The affinity group has to be more than shared belief, or it would be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

equivalent to an ideological group, it needs to have deeper bonds in the shared history and identity of its members.

Without clarifying the exact relationship between women in an affinity group and women in an ideological feminist group, two scenarios emerge in Young's work. Either the affinity group is equivalent to an ideological group or the two are distinct. Neither option is particularly appealing to women. First, if women's affinity group is also an ideological feminist group then it would need to be a unitary collective, because part of what would make the group identify with each other would be a shared belief in a common political project of feminism. Young herself, however, has been instrumental in illustrating the diversity of women, reflected in the second wave movement's splintering into humanist and gynocentric feminists.<sup>35</sup> Subsequently, it is hard to see how a unitary, feminist ideological group could develop from this diversity.

If, on the other hand, the affinity group of women is to be distinguished from a feminist group, then Young would have to face the dilemma of whether she would privilege women's representation in communicative democracy in terms of affinity, or in terms of political feminism. If her answer is to allow for both sorts of representation then Young would face a situation whereby women in the affinity group might differ from women in the feminist group in their political decisions. This situation would seem to undermine the level of unity expected of affinity groups as a unit of political representation in communicative democracy. These concerns will be examined next in much greater detail. But, it will be contended at this stage that Young misses these dilemmas because she privileges women's representation as an affinity group and then, without explanation, she conflates the objectives of this group with elements of her feminist political project. Hence, women in an affinity group become a

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<sup>35</sup> I. Young, 'Humanism, Gynocentrism, and Feminist Politics,' *Throwing Like a Girl*, (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1990), pp. 73-91, sets out her useful distinction between gynocentrics and humanist feminists and how the two have interacted to produce diverse feminist theories and views of politics.



political unit in need of representation in communicative democracy.<sup>36</sup> While Young does not conceive them explicitly as a feminist group, there are clear ties between the two and women's place in the affinity group forms part of a wider feminist political project of democratic inclusion. This political settlement will now be examined.

### **Young's Political Settlement: the model of communicative democracy**

Like Benhabib, Young is interested in a modified version of the deliberative and communitarian models of democracy. She too wants to open these up to marginalised social groups. However, unlike Benhabib, Young modifies them in accordance with her postmodern strategy to end the 'logic of identity' - the quest for sameness, certainty and unity - in social and political thought. Hence, she believes that both models, in their original forms, reflect this 'logic' and thus aim at creating an homogeneous public sphere: the deliberative model because it privileges rational discourse as 'proper' political language, excluding from the political process those groups who are seen to be non-rational, and the communitarian model because it assumes that all those in the same community should hold the same social values and excludes those who don't.<sup>37</sup> Young's model of communicative democracy, by contrast, assumes that in complex, Western societies the public will resist attempts at homogenisation of this sort.<sup>38</sup> Thus she wants to ensure that the public sphere is accessible to many marginalised groups and many types of political language and reasoning. More specifically, she wants to get women into the public sphere for two reasons. Firstly, to make demands and be heard as feminists and secondly, she believes that the inclusion of women will encourage public actors to confront the 'Other'. This sort of confrontation, in her argument, leads to better understanding

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the pattern of women's affinity group formation and the way women in such a group define their identity overlaps with the gynocentric feminist organisations of the 1970s and 1980s. Both groups value their specific culture, history and identity as women and both want recognition for this specificity.

<sup>37</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 229.

<sup>38</sup> I. Young, 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,' in M. Wilson and A. Yeatman (eds.), *Justice and Identity*, (Bridget Williams Books: New Zealand, 1995), p. 140.

between groups in society. Hence, it is necessary to detail her model of communicative democracy before assessing women's place in it as both citizens and as feminists.

The politics of difference, on Young's account, requires the political construction of a 'Rainbow Coalition'. The 'Rainbow Coalition' will give direct representation and participation to those affinity groups, including women, who have been disadvantaged and oppressed. It is aimed at securing justice for these groups once justice has been re-defined as a concept that is concerned with the cultural currency of social and political norms, as well as the distribution of economic resources.<sup>39</sup> The ultimate hope is that the coalition will replace the ideal of the impartial and homogeneous public, which on Young's reading underpins traditional liberal political models, with the ideal of the differentiated and heterogeneous public.

For Young, the ideal of impartiality that is demanded by traditional concepts of justice and politics is nothing less than an 'impossibility'.<sup>40</sup> It is a product of the unifying 'logic of identity' which means that impartiality can only be constructed by excluding those social groups whom the dominant culture designates as different. The ideal of impartiality, moreover, has had the effect of producing a public, political sphere that valorises norms of formality, professionalisation, bureaucracy and distributive justice that are not shared by all groups in society.<sup>41</sup> Hence, these norms are theorised as 'universal' forms of interaction, hiding both their roots in the subjective perspective of the 'dominant culture' and their exclusion of groups such as women, who are deemed by these standards to be emotional and irrational.

To overcome these problems, Young stipulates four conditions to ensure that communicative democracy is accessible to marginalised affinity groups. The first condition is a new cultural politics that can amend current political and social practises to include marginalised groups such as women. The second condition is a new set of 'special' political rights and monetary resources for these groups in recognition of the particular problems they face in being excluded. The third condition is the common

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<sup>39</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 115.



agreement on the rules and procedures that will govern the communicative process. The fourth and final condition is the acceptance of a new principle of affinity group representation.

#### *A 'new cultural politics'*

Young's advocates a 'cultural revolution'<sup>42</sup> at the level of the subject and society as one condition for communicative democracy. The subject prepares for this revolution by undergoing a process of 'consciousness-raising'<sup>43</sup> and recognising and accepting the differences within itself and from other subjects. On her account, this process affirms the postmodern view of the decentred self that suggests, 'rather than seeking a wholeness of the self, we who are subjects of the plural and complex society should affirm the otherness within ourselves'.<sup>44</sup> In affirming its own 'otherness', that area of its subjectivity that it does not fully understand, the subject learns to view difference as a matter of degrees, an ambiguity, and not as essentialistic categorisation. At the social level, cultural politics examines society to ask 'what practices, habits, attitudes, compartments, images, symbols and so on contribute to social domination and group oppression, and to call for the collective transformation of such practices'.<sup>45</sup>

Her emphasis on cultural politics also encompasses her new 'non-distributive' conception of justice. According to Young, most Western thinkers have viewed justice as the equitable redistribution of wealth and general economic resources. Hence, on the distributive paradigm, justice is seen to reallocate things, 'material goods', such as income and resources.<sup>46</sup> While she agrees that these resources are important, she believes them to be useless unless justice also encompasses the re-distribution of power relationships, such as access to decision-making, and the chance to develop one's own life and capacities.<sup>47</sup> These factors are often culturally, not economically, determined and are thus not remedied by legislative proposals and monetary aid. Thus,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 15.

before legislative policies can ever start to be effective, they require a group's particularity to be recognised and validated as part of the demand for justice. Justice, on these terms, means that difference itself is a claim for justice.

According to Young, one way for society to open up to these cultural concerns is through its practices and modes of political argument. She therefore delineates three forms of debate and argumentation that will characterise political discourse in communicative democracy, take account of cultural difference, and challenge dominant and exclusionary political assumptions: 'greeting, rhetoric and storytelling'.<sup>48</sup> They are designed with the hope of including groups who are perhaps not at ease with defining and talking about themselves in terms of abstract, formal language but who, nevertheless, want to give voice to the specificity of their experiences. She hopes that these three modes of argumentation will allow for trust to develop between participants in the political process and, more importantly, ensure that disadvantaged groups are listened to. In her words, 'it is not enough to make assertions and give reasons. One must also be heard'.<sup>49</sup> Hence, according to Young, it is possible to use greetings, such as offers of food, handshakes and general politeness, to keep the dialogue open when it is threatened by conflict.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, using rhetorical speech allows the speaker to refer to the specificity of their situation and therefore to move away from abstract political speech that can leave the audience feeling excluded.<sup>51</sup> Finally, storytelling allows political viewpoints to be expressed in subjective and emotional ways.<sup>52</sup> This latter sort of speech was very important in radical feminist groups to allow women to bond and to bring into the open their private experiences of being women. Thus, these modes of political argument add to the cultural conditions of better affinity group representation because they create a more sympathetic political culture in which to hear the claims of those who have been excluded.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-24.

<sup>48</sup> I. Young, 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,' *op.cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 146.



### *Group rights and resources*

However, cultural politics for Young needs to be reflected in a set of practical mechanisms that directly support the political organisation of marginalised groups. These measures include a revised system of rights, in which members of disadvantaged affinity groups are, in addition to their common rights, given a set of 'special' rights that are tailored to their particular needs.<sup>53</sup> For example, women need to be given additional pregnancy rights to supplement their general rights to equal treatment in the workplace. The state must also encourage diversity by giving monetary resources and media access to disadvantaged affinity groups so that they can politically organise their group. However, the most controversial political measure is the idea that disadvantaged groups in communicative democracy should be given the power of veto over policies that specifically concern them. In this regard, Young believes that women should have veto power over "reproductive rights".<sup>54</sup>

While these group rights are obviously particularistic, Young believes that they still have universalisable application in terms of inclusion. She defends this move, stating,

the universalist finds a contradiction in asserting both that formerly segregated groups have a right to inclusion and that these groups have a right to different treatment. There is no contradiction here, however, if attending to difference is necessary in order to make participation and inclusion possible.<sup>55</sup>

Hence, the special rights ensure that all groups have universal access to the political decision-making process.

### *Political procedures of inclusion*

The third condition of communicative democracy is a set of commonly agreed rules and procedures governing the communicative process. According to Young, a communicative polity needs a minimal unity provided by procedures of equal respect,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>53</sup> I. Young, 'Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,' *Ethics* No. 99, (January 1989), p. 269.

<sup>54</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 184.

a formal commitment to allow others to express their opinions, and procedural rules for fair discussion and decision-making.<sup>56</sup> These procedures are also necessary to ensure and enshrine affinity group representation and increase social 'understanding'.<sup>57</sup> However, she believes that they are thoroughly minimal and are 'much thinner conditions than those of shared understandings or the goals of finding common goods'.<sup>58</sup> If this is the case, it remains to be seen whether they would then be substantive enough to bring about the increase in social understanding, that Young is hoping for.

Another problem that Young fails to answer satisfactorily, is whether these procedures can be generated in a binding manner as the *condition* of good communicative practise, without losing her postmodern concern with contingency.

Young recognises this difficulty:

An origin problem emerges...a public must be constructed to decide which groups deserve specific representation in decision-making procedures. What are the principles guiding the composition of such a "constitutional convention"?... No program or set of principles can found a politics because politics is always a process in which we are already engaged.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, Young is ultimately faced with a dilemma in which she either forgoes her commitment to contingency, guaranteeing universal procedures that could 'found' a model of communicative democracy. Or, she admits that these necessary conditions of the communicative model can only be temporarily agreed on by some members of the public.

#### *The principle of affinity group representation*

The final condition of communicative democracy is her principle of group representation, based on the representation of marginalised affinity groups. Thus, she states,

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<sup>55</sup> I. Young, 'Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,' op.cit., p. 273.

<sup>56</sup> I. Young, 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,' op.cit., p. 142.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 142.



representation should be designated whenever the group's history and social situation provide a particular perspective on the issues, when the interests of members are specifically affected, and when its perceptions and interests are not likely to receive expression without that representation.<sup>60</sup>

The principle of representation in her work is, not surprisingly, concerned to secure the representation of group particularity and difference as opposed to issues and ideologies. Her principle of group representation is central to her model of democracy because it has an important role in fostering a transformative political situation. This is driven by a Millian desire for democracy to be educative, with citizens listening to the perspectives of others and, from this increased social knowledge, having a clearer idea of common needs.<sup>61</sup> As Young puts it:

One function of discussion is precisely to transform people's preferences, to alter or refine their perception of their interests, their perceptions of the needs and interests of others, their relations to those others, and their perception of collective problems, goals and solutions.<sup>62</sup>

Hence, when Young conceptualises the affinity group as the basis for political representation of disadvantaged groups in the Rainbow Coalition, she expects more than a simple process of a group taking up its constitutionally guaranteed place in discussion. Rather, it is based on the desire for a transformative political situation in which many citizens will participate in their particularity as members of specific affinity groups. Young is sceptical as to whether traditional, formal, representational guarantees are much use in getting groups included and 'heard' in this way. As she claims, 'the democratic political imagination in the modern world would benefit from serious attention to the systems of representation that will best promote active and equal participation of citizens'.<sup>63</sup> To this end, her principle of group representation is given two conditions to ensure it promotes 'active and equal participation'. One it will only be extended to oppressed groups - it is their participation that needs equalising

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<sup>59</sup> I. Young, 'Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,' *op.cit.*, p. 266.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266.

<sup>61</sup> I. Young, 'Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,' *op.cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

and encouraging - and, two, these groups, since they are likely to be broad, must themselves have representative structures.<sup>64</sup>

Young's ideal political outcome would be for affinity group representation to transform existing liberal democratic models of individual interest-based representation into a communicative democratic model. For this process to take place in its entirety, all four conditions would have to be met. Firstly, a new cultural politics that would attend to difference would need to be established that would be assisted by the communicative process. Secondly, a set of particularistic rights and resources would need to be given to hitherto marginalised affinity groups. Thirdly, minimal procedural rules of inclusion would be required to ensure universality of access and outcome. These would be consolidated by the fourth condition of a non-proportional principle of group representation for affinity groups that have previously been marginalised. Young believes that once the groups have access, they will be consulted in many political spaces, at many political levels and over many political issues. They will even be given the power of veto on national policies that specifically concern them. However, while the exclusive veto rights may seem unduly divisive, Young hopes that ultimately group presence will contribute to a transformative political situation in which otherness and diversity is confronted and re-defined in non-exclusionary, non-assimilationist and non-conflictual ways.<sup>65</sup>

### **Women in communicative democracy: institutionalising difference?**

It is now possible to examine the problems of women's representation as an affinity group in Young's model of communicative democracy. Three broad difficulties emerge: firstly, problems of essentialism, secondly, problems of political permanence and thirdly, difficulties of participation and representation. In each area she ends up undermining the social and personal diversity of women by institutionalising them in

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<sup>64</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 187.

<sup>65</sup> At the end of *Justice and the Politics of Difference* op.cit., pp. 226-256., Young refers to this ideal as 'city life,' based on a celebration of differences, the play of diversity and the erotic confrontation of strangers and their otherness.



her political model. While these problems remain in her work, there are serious doubts over its usefulness as a model of citizenship for women and feminists.

### *Problems of essentialism*

The criticisms concerning essentialism in Young's work centre on whether she fully eradicates the 'logic of identity' from her own political vision. As it was argued earlier, Young believes that the 'logic of identity' excludes social difference to create unitary and fixed forms of thought. At the social and political level, this logic results in a quest for conflict-free, impartial public institutions, further denying social difference. She wants to eradicate this logic from her political model by ensuring that excluded social groups are given representation as an affinity group that highlights their differential concerns.

However, the very process of including affinity groups in the communicative model re-introduces this logic. The group organisation tends to become rigid and fixed, so that the group can be given effective presence in communicative democracy, including the particularistic right to veto areas of national policy that specifically concern them. The exercise of the veto power is especially controversial because it would undoubtedly require substantive agreement, if not unanimity among group members, if it were ever to be implemented. As Melissa Williams has asked, 'who would exercise this veto on women's behalf in the area of reproductive rights, for example - pro-choice women or women who oppose abortion under any circumstances?'<sup>66</sup> Thus, to be an effective affinity group, women would need to be homogenised.

Young's response to the charge of essentialism has been to structure the affinity group of women so that it has separate forums for women in terms of their age, religious identity, ethnic identity and so on. However, while this move may avoid the risk of essentialising the group, it only serves to further indicate how contradictory it is to suggest that, in the face of this level of differentiation, women could agree on

the use of the veto. Elizabeth Spelman, as it is noted in Chapter Two, also warns against essentialising women at the group identity level. For Spelman, women cannot simply 'hive off' our religious, ethnic, sexual identities from their gender identities, they are too interdependent.<sup>67</sup> What Spelman's view of identity suggests, when it is applied to Young, is that it is not enough for Young to promise intra-group diversity, along the lines of class and race, and then make it secondary to the base identity of the affinity group, such as 'women' or 'black', for the purposes of political representation. Young's solution misunderstands both the nature of ethnic identity and how it interacts with gender identity to produce distinct experiences that may go beyond the realms of the affinity group.

Anne Phillips has best understood Young's difficulties with the affinity group, arguing that a of 'closure' takes place, in which, 'people com[e] together to define themselves politically through what is only one frozen single aspect of their lives'.<sup>68</sup> In other words, women who might want political representation in terms of a number of identities aside from their gendered one would be disadvantaged by being represented in an affinity group that takes gender to be their primary identity. In continuing with this type of identity politics, Young's model of democracy does not reflect her commitment to social diversity. Subsequently, by giving affinity groups powers of veto and institutional representation she undermines her own stated aim to draw the affinity group as a fluid and dynamic affiliation. It characterises the tension between her emphasis on postmodern diversity and her political institutionalisation of the affinity group.

### *The problem of institutionalisation and permanence*

The institutionalisation of affinity groups, that is required if the Rainbow Coalition is to achieve a degree of permanence, compounds the risk of essentialism. Affinity groups would quickly become institutionalised in her model because they would be

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<sup>66</sup> M. Williams, 'Justice Towards Groups Political Not Juridical,' *Political Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (February 1995) p. 90n.

<sup>67</sup> E. Spelman, *Inessential Women*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 133.



state-resourced, given organisational funding and media access, and because the increased participation of disadvantaged groups would bring about a lengthier political process.<sup>69</sup> In this process, the affinity group would need to maintain the stability of its organisation for the length of the democratic proceedings: from agenda-setting to the implementation of any resulting policy.<sup>70</sup> Hence, the affinity group would acquire a degree of permanence, forcing it towards a long-term rigid structure with a potentially hierarchical structure. As Chandran Kukathas has noted, in a similar criticism of Young's theory of group representation,

it may, in the end, benefit the elites rather than the group as a whole. The more the elites of the group associate with their political counterparts in mainstream society, the more likely their thinking (and their interests) are to diverge from that of the group.<sup>71</sup>

This political situation would be the antithesis of Young's vision of fluid, dynamic and potentially subversive affinity groups.

While this drift to permanence once again contradicts her focus on the fluidity of the affinity group, it is especially problematic to assume that a diverse affinity group of women could achieve such long-term rigidity. Even on her own assessment, women have many differences that would need separate representative forums in the affinity group and much negotiation to allow the collective to operate. In these circumstances, how would women's common political stance be agreed upon? Would there be a leadership to report back to the affinity group at every stage in the decision-making process? Or, would the decision be made on the entire group's position before the political decision-making process began? If the latter were the case, the transformative affects of confronting otherness in communicative democracy would be futile because of such a prioristic will formation. Yet it does not seem practicable for

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<sup>68</sup> A. Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 116.

<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., admits that decision-making could even be stalled and she defends this, stating, 'if...the alternative to stalled decisionmaking is a unified public that makes decisions ostensibly embodying the general interest which systematically ignore...particular groups, then stalled decisionmaking may sometimes be just', p. 186.

<sup>70</sup> C. Hunold and I. Young, 'Justice, Democracy and Hazardous Siting,' in *Political Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, (March 1998), p. 89.

<sup>71</sup> C. Kukathas, 'Liberalism, Multiculturalism and Oppression,' in A. Vincent (ed.), *Political Theory: Tradition and Diversity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 117.

the affinity group leadership to conduct their own internal debates for every moot point in the decision-making process.

A second problem with permanence is that it also risks the fragmentation of the political sphere into a number conflicting power arrangements in which no-one has the ultimate authority to adjudicate between competing claims for representation. Melissa Williams believes that this vacuum is a result of Young's dismissal of impartiality such that:

When the command to attend to particularity of perspectives on issues of justice enters the public sphere, we seem to be in danger of losing firm ground from which we can evaluate the competing justice claims of different social groups.<sup>72</sup>

Whilst such an arena would be heterogeneous, it would be at the cost of making it a space in which all claims of oppression and claims to justice became validated. It exposes the fact that when diversity determines political interaction, there is a need for formal representative structures that can allow authoritative decisions to be made in the face of possible irreconcilable conflict. But Young's principle of group representation is concerned with inclusion and participation, not authoritative democratic outcomes.

#### *Difficulties of representation and participation*

Hence, while Young does detail the principle of group representation, it is clear that she privileges representational structures and mechanisms in so far as they allow for group participation and aim at an ideal of transformative communicative democracy. Judith Squires suggests that Young's principle of representation is primarily a 'symbolic' concept and is based on the subjective assessment of whether a group is being fully recognised through representation. Squires is unhappy that Young does not detail who measures this 'representativeness' or who has the authority to decide if a group needs recognition in the first place.<sup>73</sup> Squires's criticisms expose the insubstantial nature of Young's principle of representation. Young has no mechanisms to measure the success of group inclusion and is left relying on her faith

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<sup>72</sup> M. Williams, 'Justice Towards Groups Political Not Juridical,' op.cit., pp. 81-82.

<sup>73</sup> J. Squires, 'Liberal Constitutionalism, Identity and Difference,' op.cit., p. 633.



in the transformative process of communicative democracy to ensure that representation is fulfilled.

This weakness of her principle group representative mechanisms becomes more overt in the light of her desire to increase participation, and it raises the question of whether her political model allows for authoritative decision-making at all. As the political process opens up to hitherto excluded groups, Young believes a democratisation of society will take place leading to a prolonged political process. For Young, protraction is a small price to pay to allow disadvantaged groups to be heard. However, Young does not make it clear how decisions will be made in a situation where there are many conflicting group demands. Indeed, she is not convinced that such competition will emerge in a communicative democracy, claiming that 'often...conflicts of interest are more perceived than real'.<sup>74</sup> It appears that Young, like Benhabib, privileges the transformative potential of deliberative democracy to make participants more sympathetic to each other. Hence, any procedural rules in her model of communicative democracy are designed to encourage participation rather than decision.

Ultimately, it appears that without formally theorising these traditional principles of representation at the wider democratic level, Young's political settlement risks two problematic outcomes. One that the process of participation will be a success and too many groups will become involved in the deliberation.<sup>75</sup> This scenario is especially worrying since Young has no clear idea of who or what will decide on inclusion in the political process and thus, it could simply become impracticable. Conversely, the process could be a failure and participation might remain at low levels. In the latter scenario representative measures are necessary to imbue participants in the process with the authority to speak for others.

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<sup>74</sup> I. Young, *Justice and Communicative Democracy*, op.cit., p. 136.

<sup>75</sup> In her article with Hunold, C. Hunold and I. Young, 'Justice, Democracy and Hazardous Siting,' op.cit., p. 89, she mentions this possibility, but she does not detail the exact representative measures to deal with it or acknowledge how coming to a decision might exclude the wishes of some of these groups.

Unfortunately, participation in a protracted political process is especially problematic for many women.<sup>76</sup> Anne Phillips has expressed surprise that so many feminists have, like Young, heralded participatory democracy. As she states, 'the alliance between feminism and participatory democracy looks strained, and, considering the intense pressures on women's time it is remarkable that feminists have been so wedded to a politics of meetings'.<sup>77</sup> If women's participation cannot be secured, and Young makes no good case as to why it should be, barring a widespread cultural revolution, then representative structures and mechanisms are instrumental in bestowing legitimate authority on a 'leadership' to make decisions. Phillips notes that there are only two mechanisms to register opinions for this purpose.<sup>78</sup> One has been the vote, which Young would see as too minimal because it is confined to a private decision-making process as opposed to face-to-face deliberation.<sup>79</sup> The other mechanism is attendance at meetings, which falls into the same problems of the pressures on time.

If representative structures and mechanisms are not in place at the level of the affinity group then two outcomes also appear possible. Either, Young recognises that the affinity group can only speak for a limited number of women, in which case it is legitimate to question its usefulness for representing anymore than a few committed and interested women. And, the next section will look at how Young herself looks at this possibility. Or, secondly, the affinity group must be broken down into its various sub-sections until unanimity among all members can be found. Young has already criticised other discourse theorists, notably Habermas, for demanding consensus, seeing it indicative of a desire for homogenising unity. However, without minimal

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<sup>76</sup> Although it might be noted that this problem is not confined to women. As Mark Warren, *What Should We Expect from More Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics*, op.cit., p. 243, warns, the tendency of many radical democrats is to presume that participation in politics will be of great appeal once democratic restructuring has been completed.

<sup>77</sup> A. Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, op.cit., p. 111.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>79</sup> Young, 'Justice and Communicative Democracy,' op.cit., believes that this sort of minimal and private mechanism undermines democracy and, thus, she criticises 'interest-based concepts of democracy' because it is a 'privatized understanding of democracy in which citizens never leave their own private and parochial pursuits,' p. 126.



representative mechanisms, such as voting, there seems to be no other way to aggregate opinion and secure a decision at group level.

What becomes clear in Young's view of communicative democracy is that she cannot match her engagement of postmodernism with her political settlement. As Judith Squires recognises it is presented with

a tension stemming from an ontological position which understands identity as contextual and fluid and an advocacy position which recognises the need for formal procedures of political recognition, necessarily working to freeze identity in some way.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, the three sets of criticisms of Young's political settlement suggest that she often avoids this tension by reversing some of her postmodern and feminist commitments. Firstly, the affinity group, in the face of decentred subjectivity, becomes more structured to fix identities of the group members for democratic representation and consultation. Secondly, the Rainbow Coalition of communicative democracy can be interpreted as requiring a degree of permanence that does not accord with her vision of the social flux and diversity in which groups emerge and dissipate. Finally, in making the democratic process dependent on prolonged participation, it becomes deeply unattractive to many women who simply do not have time for this level of political activity. In all, Young has continuing problems in conceiving of political identity. She continues to base her political project on a concept of political identity based on the affinity group and hopes that the representation of these identities will lead to a transformative political situation in which they are met with sympathy.

### **Remedying essentialism: women and the series?**

Given these concerns with essentialism in her view of the affinity group, Young has responded by recently adopting the Sartrean concept of the 'series' or 'serial collectivity'.<sup>81</sup> She hopes that the concept of serial collectivity will 'allow us to see women as a collective without identifying common attributes that all women have or

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<sup>80</sup> J. Squires, 'Liberal Constitutionalism, Identity and Difference,' *op.cit.*, p. 628.

<sup>81</sup> I see this new concept as developmental in Young's political theory. It has not, as yet, impacted on her communicative model of democracy, which remains committed to affinity group representation.

implying that women have a common identity'.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the series is a form of collective in which the members are without organisation because they are 'passively' identified by their common relationship to the same set of material conditions. Women in the series remain isolated individuals, but dominant interpretations of the body and heterosexuality constrain all of their choices. Consequently, according to Young, all women have a position in the series, but the diversity of women's experiences is maintained as 'no individual woman's identity will...escape the markings of gender, but how gender marks her life is her own'.<sup>83</sup> If women go on to recognise their common location in the series then one of two things happens. There is either an ephemeral moment of identification and they return immediately to the level of the series. Or, they organise themselves into a more permanent political grouping.

The exact nature of this relationship between the series and the resulting political group is interesting. She distinguishes between the group and series in terms of identification, stating, 'a group is a collection of persons who do mutually identify...A series, on the other hand, is not a mutually acknowledging identity with any common project...Women need have nothing in common in their individual lives to be serialized as women'.<sup>84</sup> In other words, there does not need to be a conscious recognition of group membership to be placed in the series. However, she goes on to say that, 'a relationship between the series and groups does exist...groups arise on the basis of and in response to a serialized condition'.<sup>85</sup> By making these differences explicit, she removes the series from the domain of identity politics, something that she fails to do with the concept of the affinity group. Its basis is not a woman's sense of personal identity but her material conditions. Consequently, groups arising from the series begin to take on a very different form to the ones arising from affinity.

In her work on the series, a group develops from the series on a far more limited basis. In not having the broad basis the affinity group of women was supposed

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<sup>82</sup> I. Young, 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking About Women as a Social Collective,' *op.cit.*, p. 188.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.



to have, Young is able to make a useful distinction between women's position in a social group and their membership of a political collective. In her earlier concept of the affinity group, women's social position in the group becomes identical to their status as political actors, implying that affinity groups of women have the same sorts of concerns in both the affinity group and in the political process. She only makes a social/political distinction in so much as to suggest that affinity groups of women are not 'ideological' feminist groups and even then she does not preserve this boundary.

According to Young, therefore, groups based on the series 'are always partial in relation to the series - they bring together only *some* women for *some* purposes involving their gendered serialized experience' (my italics).<sup>86</sup> Moreover, in setting the boundaries of membership in this manner, Young is more able to acknowledge irreconcilable differences between women, differences that would shatter the affinity group as she has conceived it. Thus, she is clear that groups based on serial collectivity will not always be feminist and indeed, some might be, 'explicitly anti-feminist'.<sup>87</sup> Once she stops searching for the exacting and impossible cultural, social and political identification required by affinity groups, women's political collectivity could be defined in a much more limited and fluid manner.

Whilst these modifications are welcome, Young has not, as yet, substantially changed her political framework. Hence, the idea of the series remains a speculative piece. Young still sees her political settlement in terms of the political representation of unified, single affinity groups and not the limited groups suggested by her view of serial collectivity. Further, her political settlement continues to rest on the unity of the affinity group as a basic political unit for representation at local and state political levels. It would be interesting therefore to consider the implications of this view of serial groups for the democratic representation of women as women and as feminists.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

## The end of identity politics: new directions in democracy

It was suggested that Young's concept of the series opens up the possibility of a more limited and realistic view of women in a number of political collectivities, not all of them feminist. As such, there are a number of parallels between Young's view of political groups of women based on the series and Fraser and Nicholson's view of postmodern-feminism, that was discussed in Chapter Two. To reiterate their position briefly, like Young, Fraser believes that certain postmodern theories have useful applications in feminist theory, particularly in relation to how women view their social identities and their place in social groups. Fraser believes that postmoderns, such as Foucault, posit a view of social identity as being exceedingly complex and multi-faceted, with which she would agree. Thus, as it was noted, Fraser argues that 'no one is simply a woman',<sup>88</sup> and that, moreover, 'one is not always a woman in the same degree'.<sup>89</sup> Hence, for Fraser women will not always act politically as feminists and when they do so it will be from different perspectives.

In an article written with Linda Nicholson, she goes so far as to suggest that this view of politics might be termed or provide the basis for 'postmodernist feminism'.<sup>90</sup> This idea brings to fruition many of Young's ideas on women's serial collectivity. Hence, without unduly conflating the two views, Fraser believes that given the diversity of women and feminists, women can only form alliance-based political groups that do not assume a unity of women.<sup>91</sup> This view concurs with Young's desire, stated in her article on serial collectivity, that 'feminist politics must be coalition politics'.<sup>92</sup> If Young expanded her account of feminist coalitions as opposed to affinity groups, she would be better placed to address the conflicts that arise from

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<sup>88</sup> N. Fraser, 'The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics,' in N. Fraser and S. Lee Bartky (eds.), *Revaluing French Feminism. Critical Essays on Difference, Agency and Culture*, (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 178.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>90</sup> N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism,' in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 5, Nos. 2-3, (June 1988), p. 374.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391. See my discussion of their work in Chapter Two, p. 81.

<sup>92</sup> I. Young, 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking About Women as a Social Collective,' *op.cit.*, p. 212.



women's diverse experiences. Fraser and Nicholson, however, do go on to describe how the alliance of women might operate in political practice, suggesting that,

the underlying premise of this practice is that while some women share some common interests...such commonalities are by no means universal; rather, they are interlaced with differences even with conflicts. This, then, is a practise made up of a patchwork of overlapping alliances, not one circumscribable by an essential definition.<sup>93</sup>

With these revisions in mind, it is possible to apply some of the insights of the politics of the series to her general political settlement. At the core of this process are questions about the representative nature of her political settlement and related questions of how groups of women, who cannot necessarily be grouped in the affinity group, can pursue citizenship. Moreover these questions are also concerned with how groups of *feminists* might find their place in the political process when they cannot guarantee the cohesion or permanence of their collectives.

#### *New directions in democracy*

In other words, this is a return to Young's starting point to see what is left of her concept of the affinity group in relation to women. She should reassert its postmodern roots in diversity and fluidity, something that is lost as she begins to structure and institutionalise the group. Instead of theorising an affinity group based on 'the manner of sharing assumptions', Young could then modify the actual concept of affinity with the idea of the series. To reiterate, her view of the series saw a collective of women arise in relation to a set of material conditions and not due to the need for identity recognition and affirmation. On the basis of this she expects only a few women to be interested in making the step to the group. The explicit limiting of the membership of the group means that Young cannot institutionalise it as a representative group of *women*. It is better interpreted as political alliance of *feminists* that cannot hope to politically represent an entire social group of women.

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<sup>93</sup> N. Fraser and L. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism,' *op.cit.*, p. 391.

It thus stands as a more limited approach to collectivity, requiring mechanisms to ensure that groups themselves are representative, having leaderships, decision-making procedures and formal rules of association. However, the fact that a grouping of women based on the series might be transitory and limited has some benefits over Young's original approach. It is more likely to remain an alternative force capable of being both adaptable and flexible. In requiring permanence, Young 'sets' the affinity group and binds it into a set of very traditional power relations. Hence, once the group is established in the protracted political process of the Rainbow Coalition its potential to shift and change is subverted by the need to secure the agreement of the group to, for example, implement the veto or contribute the group's collective viewpoint to the agenda.

In resisting institutionalisation in the communicative process, any grouping of women based on the series should remain open to change and fluidity and avoid the fixing or essentialising of women's identities. Of course, in avoiding institutionalisation Young would not be able to depend on her group to have any degree of permanence. It could not be built into the very fabric of a Rainbow Coalition. This is not to suggest that a particular grouping of women would be hopelessly ephemeral, but that permanence cannot be presumed and secured politically in a communicative model of democracy. On this view, it would be better to fight for women's inclusion as feminists *and* as citizens, two separate types of inclusion. In this way women can seek out democratic representation in terms of a range of their political identities, without putting at risk feminist representation. Moreover, it would ensure that women are not just democratically included in their affinity group, ignoring those women who disagree with the group.

Finally, seeing the group as a limited alliance alongside other alliances helps remedy some of the problems of participation. Interested women would be free to commit themselves or withdraw as they pleased, again suggesting a degree of flux and fluidity. As there is no longer any need to make the alliance representative of all women, as there is with the affinity group, there would be no need to seek extensive



participation as the very foundation of the alliance, a process that is often a deterrent to women's involvement in politics. This reconceptualisation of women's political activity would again allow Young to reassert her commitment to decentred subjectivity, whereby the subject has a number of social and political affiliations.

## **Conclusion**

It was shown that Young engaged postmodern theory in two ways. To reconceptualise individual and group identities in a non-essentialistic manner, and to eradicate the 'logic of identity' - the quest for unity, sameness and certainty - from political and social thought. This engagement allowed her to theorise the subject as a socially constituted and decentred self that relies on its group memberships for self-definition and affirmation. Membership in many of these social groups is passive, with the subject unconsciously accepting it as an element of their self-identity. However, the subject, particularly when it has been oppressed, subordinated or discriminated against, may actively choose to identify with a social group or a number of social groups. This sort of social group is an affinity group. For Young, the subject does not necessarily have to share a common sense of identity with the group but they must actively chose to identify with it and find its common bonds affirming.

The affinity group for Young transforms the passive social group into an active, dynamic and political group relationship. Its members refuse to be subordinated by dominant cultures and assert their differences, seeking political recognition and representation in terms of these. It was suggested that this move to politicise the affinity group re-introduces essentialism and the 'logic of identity' in Young's work for two reasons. One, the group needs to have deep bonds of affinity to maintain this level of unity and, two, to maintain the affinity group for any length of time, it is necessary to fix the group in terms of one view of identity.

These essentialising processes are compounded when Young applies the concept of the affinity group to women. She suggests that women, despite being diverse, are a 'highly visible' group who could come together in the affinity group for

political action. Yet, Young never explicitly details how diverse women can come together to form solidaristic bonds based on identity, shared status and common history. Indeed, much of Young's work on women and feminism has pluralised them and noted how even the experience of oppression is contingent and divergent. Hence, with some inconsistency, Young ends up theorising women as a united affinity group in need of direct representation in communicative democracy and then conflates the objectives of this group with those of ideological feminists.

This communicative model of democracy is a reworked deliberative model that believes in the transformative effects of discourse and confrontation of 'others', those who are different to oneself. Young opens the model up to excluded affinity groups such as women by giving them special political rights, additional resources to organise politically and building a principle of group representation into decision-making. This process culminates in giving women the power of veto over reproduction policies, on the assumption that women could agree on these issues. In other words, she can theorise women as a specific, homogeneous political group in need of democratic inclusion but only at the expense of essentialising them. Hence, women are tied into their affinity group for political representation and participation, ensuring that the group is united enough to fulfil the rigours of an extended decision-making process and to exercise the veto. It was seen that Young has begun to remedy these charges of essentialism by theorising women as a serial collectivity - a group based on a common material rather than identitarian status. However, she has not modified her concept of communicative democracy, or her principle of group representation of affinity groups on which it rests, to include the idea of seriality.

Ultimately, what is lost in her political view is a sense of women's wider inclusion as citizens. Citizens who may have individual interests that may conflict with those of their gender identity. For this citizen identity to be protected, more traditional forms of individualistic representative democracy need to be considered. Further, it was argued that Young has to rethink the whole idea of *institutionalising* group representation and social differences in the political process. It is necessary to develop



the implications her model of serial collectivity has for the whole concept of democratic representation. Moreover, the other implication of the series is that political identities are often conflictual and transitory which raises serious doubts over the transformative hopes of her democratic model.

It is at this point that Mouffe's work can be introduced. She has made similar theoretical journeys to Young but, crucially, does not believe that radical democracy and the incorporation of difference has to be necessarily based on participation and discourse as both Benhabib and Young do. Instead, she has become increasingly concerned to explore agonal modes of politics and democracy and addresses the dilemma of finding a distinctive political identity that is informed by gender but not determined by it.

## **Chapter Five. Chantal Mouffe: Feminism, Agonal Democracy and the Construction of Political Identity**

### **Introduction**

In the last Chapter it was argued that Iris Young has substantially revised her view of women as an 'affinity group' in favour of the concept of 'serial collectivity'. The latter type of group is based on women sharing a common material condition and not, as was the case with affinity group membership, sharing deep bonds of common history and culture. However, she has not as yet altered her model of communicative democracy to accommodate this revision. It remains based on a principle of 'affinity group' representation that essentialises women and institutionalises their presumed social status as a unified gender group. Hence, a gap opens up between her new view of feminism as a short-term, limited 'serial group' and her model of democracy that still needs women's political organisation to be based on affinity and to have a degree of permanence. Chantal Mouffe's vision of agonal democracy, it will be contended, goes some way to fill this gap by introducing a concept of 'the political' that can include women as a non-essential, flexible political alliance.

Chantal Mouffe's model is so important for feminists in a new wave because, in contrast to Young and Benhabib, she does not assume that the democratic confrontation of difference will necessarily be transformative of social relations. Hence, she makes the possibility of social and personal conflict central to her model of agonal democracy. It is this emphasis on conflict that makes her the most successful of the three thinkers studied here in understanding the distinct nature of 'the political' and the pull between anti-essentialism and political identity formation. She states therefore that while the subject has no authentic, social essential identity that will hold true all of the time, they do need to understand themselves as a cohesive unit when they act politically. Hence the subject always oscillates between instances of 'unfixity'



(when it has no sense of a coherent identity) and 'fixity'<sup>1</sup> (when it predominantly identifies with one element of its identity such as gender or race). It is not possible, given this sort of flux, to assume that a political identity will necessarily or easily follow from a subject's social relationships and group membership, which are themselves diverse. Mouffe's work on feminism also adheres to this anti-essentialist stance. She argues that women can only be seen as a group in terms of their shared social construction and not in terms of any common inherent identity. For Mouffe, then, social identities must be developed and re-constructed for the political process. On these terms, any political coming together and identification as citizens is a precarious and artificial process of articulation and construction. Such construction takes account of 'the political' as a distinct dimension of human relationships that cannot simply be conflated with social relations.

In response to the need for a constructed political identity, Mouffe introduces her concept of radical democratic citizenship. This is a type of citizenship that seeks the democratisation of society, allowing radical movements such as feminists, ecologists, blacks etc. to align and question relations of subordination and dominance. These groups, according to her argument, can only form an alliance because they are non-essential, fluid and open. Hence, they can make alliances with other groups without feeling that their true and authentic identity has been undermined. To be successful the radical democratic project needs a political model that embraces its openness, possibilities for conflict, and the anti-essential identities of its members. Mouffe thus posits a model of agonal democracy to meet these demands.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, this chapter will address Mouffe's political postmodernism and its role in understanding political identity as a construction. It will then examine how the radical democratic view of citizenship is constructed on postmodern terms, and how it

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<sup>1</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> It is only relatively recently that Mouffe has begun to consider a model of agonal democracy as opposed to radical democracy, the three best sources of this view are C. Mouffe, 'Politics and the Limits of Liberalism', *ibid.*, pp. 135-154, C. Mouffe, 'Politics, Democratic Action, and Solidarity,' *Inquiry*, Vol. 38, Nos. 1-2, (June 1995), pp. 99-108 and C. Mouffe, 'Democracy, Power and the

relates to women as a political collective in terms of their place as citizens and as feminists. Two vital questions need to be asked in this regard. First, does the concept of radical democratic citizenship collectivise women without essentialising them as she claims? Secondly, does the concept of radical democratic citizenship allow women to be feminists with specific political demands? Her model of agonal democracy will then be addressed as a political project that has at its root a concept of 'the political' with important implications for feminists in a new wave.

### **Theorising postmodernism: identity and society**

Postmodern theories are at the heart of Mouffe's concept of constructed political identity. She first engaged with postmodernism and poststructuralism in her work with Ernesto Laclau.<sup>3</sup> They explicitly theorised these discourses in a political way, applying them as strategies to understand post-Marxist socialist movements and thought in twentieth century Europe. They used the discourses to raise questions about the unified socialist political subject, the universalistic, Marxist economic view of society and also the Marxist idea of unifying and truthful discourse. In her own work she has taken this analysis further and has recognised a number of interesting links between postmodern theories and elements of conservative discourse. Thus, she notes that both discourses look for the limits of Enlightenment rationalism and universalism, view humans as limited and imperfect, and consider historic context to be vital to current political thought and practise.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Mouffe, on Cahoon's schema mentioned in Chapter Two,<sup>5</sup> places postmodern discourses very much in the category of an attempt to find the limits of modern thought and politics, without rejecting the entire political project of

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'Political', in S. Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) pp. 245-256.

<sup>3</sup> E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (London and New York: Verso, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., pp. 15-16. In terms of the importance of history, conservatives believe that tradition can be the only foundation of political theory and postmodern thinkers emphasise the contingency of political thought and action on historical conditions.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Chapter Two, p. 49.



modernity.<sup>6</sup> For Mouffe the Western tradition is constituted by Enlightenment thought and the democratic tradition. While the former has relied on universalism, foundationalism and rationalism, the latter has been plural, open and complex. Hence, the democratic tradition has operated with the same objectives of equality and liberty that underpinned the Enlightenment project, but has seen these concepts move from being standardised, idealised criteria of action to contingent, pluralised and contested democratic practises. It is the tradition of democracy that Mouffe wants to defend, by separating it off from its last vestiges in Enlightenment thought. As she writes, 'in order to radicalize the idea of pluralism, so as to make it a vehicle for a deepening of the democratic revolution, we have to break with rationalism, individualism and universalism'.<sup>7</sup> Mouffe is thus attempting to construct a new radical democratic citizenship by restating elements of the modern democratic tradition in the context of social diversity and the rise of New Social Movements (NSMs) to further democratise society. It is thus fruitful to examine the political basis for her theory of radical democratic citizenship in her postmodern theorising of identity, subjectivity and discourse.

### *Theorising a postmodern subject*

Ever since her writings with Ernesto Laclau, Mouffe has been faithful to postmodern, anti-essentialist views of identity, that were outlined in Chapter Two. Like Young, she uses the Lacanian theory of the subject to show that every subject has a plural and relational identity, writing that

it is indispensable to develop a theory of the subject as a decentred, detotalized agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject positions between which there exists no a priori or necessary relation.<sup>8</sup>

However, Mouffe does not suggest here that the subject is entirely fragmented by the multiplicity of its social relationships, only that any connection between the various

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<sup>6</sup> *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

social identities arises in response to a particular context. Nevertheless, Benjamin Bertram has criticised Mouffe, along with Laclau, for reifying 'unfixity' and anti-essentialism in her political vision of identity. He maintains that it is a sort of inverted romanticism in which she retains the romantic drive for certainty and 'plenitude', not by searching for 'Being' as nineteenth century romantics did, but rather by exalting dislocated and decentred subjectivity.<sup>9</sup>

Bertram's criticisms are not borne out by a close reading of Mouffe's work. She believes that every moment of flux and openness in the subject's identity is interpreted, understood and shaped by discourse so that it becomes partially fixed. Hence, the subject is not, as Bertram suggests, completely governed by dislocation and fracture. As Mouffe notes of anti-essential subjectivity:

On the one hand, there is a movement of decentring that prevents the fixing of a set of positions around a preconstituted point; on the other hand, and as a result of this essential non-fixity, there is an opposite movement: the institution of nodal points, partial fixations that limit the flux of the signified under the signifier.<sup>10</sup>

In more concrete terms, this view of subjectivity means that each subject has a number of social identities, which cannot be unified into a cohesive identity: neither in the substantive idea of 'Being' nor in Benhabib's minimal sense of narrative unity.<sup>11</sup> But, according to Mouffe, it is quite possible for a subject in response to a particular social context to momentarily fix her identity in accordance with one identification: for example, a woman might join a feminist group and identify herself as a feminist. Thus, the subject position, as Anna Marie Smith puts it for Laclau and Mouffe, 'become[s] privileged such that the meaning of other subject positions becomes increasingly defined through their relations with that position'.<sup>12</sup> In this process one particular identity, such as a woman's feminist affiliation, becomes very important in how the subject conducts her life, subsuming other aspects of her identity under it. It is

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<sup>9</sup> B. Bertram, 'New reflections on the 'Revolutionary' Politics of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,' *Boundary 2*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall 1995), p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Citizenship and Political Identity,' *October*, Vol. 61, (1992), p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Chapter Three, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe: the Radical Democratic Imaginary*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 98.



important to note that even such a definite identification does not determine the subject's entire selfhood, it does not form its essential nature. For example, the woman in the feminist group is never simply a feminist, she may be a businesswoman, a mother etc. Consequently, the subject can only be identified with one element of their identity in the particular context that gave rise to it: the woman is a feminist only when she attends her feminist group or speaks about feminism. In this sense Mouffe's view of identity is performative, whereby the identity only exists insofar as it is being 'acted out' by the subject.

### *Theorising Postmodern Society*

For Mouffe anti-essentialism at the level of personal identity constitutes and is constituted by social relations that also lack any essential definition. In her work with Laclau she argues that social relations and their concomitant social identities are so diverse that it is impossible to understand society as an organic whole or in terms of one overarching social theory: 'society never manages fully to be society'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, society cannot be objectified and understood in terms of one universal theory. Rather, it is a fragmented mix of social relationships between different groups and individuals, power relations, empirical existence and discursive understandings. In turn, these fragments are not themselves defined in an essentialistic manner; they have no fixed meaning. As Mouffe writes, 'the fragments [do not] possess any kind of fixed identity, prior to the contingent and pragmatic form of their articulation'.<sup>14</sup> Put simply, diverse social processes have no essential order, at best the theorist can impose an artificial and temporary order on them, but this process will never define society as a whole.

For Mouffe the idea of the fragmented society limits universalistic attempts to theorise society in terms of one social process or one set of underlying ideas, such as, for example, capitalist modes of production or patriarchy. Mouffe argues that society

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<sup>13</sup> E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, op.cit., p. 127.

is so complex that it escapes these sorts of theories and 'what remains is a society without clearly defined outlines, a social structure that is impossible to describe from the perspective of a single, or universal, point of view'.<sup>15</sup> Initially, her view of social theory and society seems to correspond to Benhabib's fear that postmodernism undermines social theory and the radical impetus it provides for political action. For Mouffe, however, the theorist has plenty of scope to consider social diversity and to produce theories, concepts and ideas. In very Foucauldian terms, therefore, the theorist looks for 'regularity in dispersion', order in diversity.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is only because social meaning is not fixed that it is necessary to produce social theory, for if social meanings were pre-determined, then theory would become defunct. There would be no need to try and understand or explain the social order.

#### *Theorising postmodern discourse: power relations and contingency*

The theorist, then, defines the relationship between the plural elements that constitute social relations, giving them temporary shape.<sup>17</sup> The resulting theory is postmodernist in that it is neither universalistic - applicable to any system of social relation - nor foundationalist - capable of prescribing a future set of social relations. Instead, Mouffe believes that all social theory is limited because it is contingent on existing social conditions and open to contest from other discourses. She argues that all discourses are contingent on the tradition in which they are formulated because 'we are constructed as subjects through a series of already existing discourses, and that it is through this tradition which forms us that the world is given to us and all political action made possible'.<sup>18</sup> On these terms, the theorist cannot step outside of her tradition to produce universalisable discourse, and her theory thus remains partial, situated and perspectivist.

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<sup>14</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* op.cit., p. 106, cite Foucault in these terms.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 134-145, they describe process by which a theorist can produce a social theory.

<sup>18</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 16.



For Mouffe, political theories are also limited because they are imbued with power relations and conflict, which means they will be contested and reinterpreted. She argues that this type of competition is 'ineradicable' from discourse and gives it an inescapably political character.<sup>19</sup> Mouffe's definition of the 'political' will be examined later in great detail, but at this stage it suggests the presence of conflict as discourses are contested by competing interpretations of the same principles and events. For example, feminist discourses have historically been challenged by both anti-feminist discourses and divergent theories of feminism. Mouffe believes that such political antagonism is productive as well as destructive, allowing new discourses and ideas to form.

In general, her vision of discourse ties together her postmodern claims. Postmodernism, for Mouffe, is unequivocally political. She uses it strategically to both understand the fragmentation of radical political movements and to *politicise* traditional philosophical concepts. It questions the essentialism, universality and rationality of modern ideas of unified subjectivity, society and discourse and opens these areas up to contingency, conflict, antagonism and plurality. By submitting these concepts to such a process, postmodernism politicises them, showing their artificial and constructed roots in historical traditions and political discourses. It is now necessary to examine the political implications of this view in Mouffe's work, in terms of building contingent political identities, envisioning radical citizenship and formulating agonal democracy.

### **Building political identity: the 'hegemonic formation'**

Mouffe calls the contingent and artificial process by which diverse social forces are momentarily shaped and understood in terms of a social or political theory, 'hegemonic formation'.<sup>20</sup> Hegemony in her account does not found a future political

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>20</sup> Mouffe first develops the concept with Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, op.cit., p. 143, after borrowing the idea from Gramsci and, for the

action. Rather, the process of hegemonic formation presupposes plural, complex, social relations, such that '[it] will not be the majestic unfolding of an identity but the response to a crisis'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, it is only after fragmentation - of a social movement, a social group or an individual - has occurred that hegemony can forge a partial political unity. It is a discursive political strategy that works in a particular context, at a particular time, to draw groups of people together for political action according to common principles and aims.

'Hegemonic formation,' therefore, takes place by theoretically connecting the fragmented relationships in society. It constructs a relationship between fragmented subjects and social processes to create an alliance for political purposes. For example, to create a hegemonic formation about democracy, a theorist might consider how different left and right wing theories of democracy have common ideas that are also reflected in the institutional practises of democracy and in citizens' attitudes towards democracy. As Mouffe says, 'a successful hegemonic formation signifies a period of relative stabilisation and the creation of a widely shared "common sense".<sup>22</sup> This hegemonic formation is only a temporary and partial stabilisation and new fragments and antagonisms emerge in relation to it. Indeed, these opposition factors can help to give it shape by providing an external standard for the formation to define itself against.<sup>23</sup> For example, during the Cold War, Western liberal democracies often defined themselves against communist regimes.

In practice, Mouffe hopes that the construction of a 'hegemonic formation' will create bonds between different social actors in society, developing a kind of political alliance or coalition governed by shared objectives and principles. These bonds can be created either between individuals in terms of one social characteristic, for example bringing women together, or by binding different political groupings such

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purposes of my argument, it matters not so much if this is a correct reading of Gramsci's account, but how it reads as a strategy for constructing political identity.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 14.



as environmentalists with feminists and other social movements. It can also be a more conventional political process carried out by political parties.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore the idea of hegemonic formation is like Young's more recent concept of the 'serial group,' with its members also coming together primarily to politically act rather than to build social bonds. It can be distinguished from Young's earlier idea of the 'affinity group' which was shown to be essentialistic and identitarian. In the affinity group, political actors come together in terms of their shared social status and common history. The 'hegemonic formation', by contrast, has no necessary relation to the social identities of the subject's involved in it. The political actors involved in the formation come together purely in terms of their identification with the hegemony - as a direct process of consenting to the ideas and conditions of the hegemonic formation - thus creating a specifically *political* alliance.

According to Mouffe, what the hegemony sets up among these political actors is a 'chain of equivalence', in which 'a type of commonality is created that does not erase plurality and differences'.<sup>25</sup> Put simply, in her account hegemony also ensures that while the diverse groups are brought together they retain a degree of difference. Hence, the 'chain of equivalence' produces common aims in terms of the hegemonic formation, with different groups and individuals consenting to the objective principles of the hegemonic formation. It does not depend on the actors involved having common identities, histories or social status. It simply establishes a political relationship between these actors, suggesting that they might come from their different positions to seek a common objective, for example, gay rights activists might join with feminists to end the relations of subordination they all suffer. Mouffe's theory of hegemony therefore displaces traditional radical, identity politics because the importance of identity in her political process is, as Kirstie McClure suggests, 'not what one *is*, but

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Citizenship and Political Identity,' op.cit., p. 32.

what one *enacts*'.<sup>26</sup> The political objective is not to defend a pre-existing identity for these are too complex, but to strategically create a new political identity for action. Consequently, these hegemonic connections are constructs requiring no more than a minimal sense of commonality between the actors in the alliance. Mouffe's own 'hegemonic formation' of radical democratic citizenship will be examined next.

### **Constructing the radical democratic citizen identity in liberal democracy: onwards to agonal democracy**

Once Mouffe has established the ideas behind the 'hegemonic formation' - based on her postmodern assumptions of the contingency of discourse, the anti-essentialistic nature of subjectivity and the openness of society - she develops her own idea of radical democratic identity. This concept of radical democratic citizenship is a 'hegemonic formation'; it is an artificial identity that is discursively and contingently produced for political purposes. Its contingent conditions are to be found in Western liberal democracies and its discursive basis means that it is open to conflict and competition from other theories of citizenship. As Mouffe puts it, 'it aims at the construction of a "we" in a context of diversity and conflict'.<sup>27</sup> It is thus necessary to outline Mouffe's view of radical democratic citizenship, how she defines it against the background of liberal democracy, and its status as a non-essential political identity for both groups and individuals. Only then, is it possible to consider women's identities as radical citizens.

#### *Defining radical democratic citizenship in a liberal democratic context*

For Mouffe, the radical democratic citizenship identity is inescapably constructed in the context of liberal democratic politics and its underlying values of liberty and equality. Thus she writes that radical democratic citizenship will, 'through a common

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<sup>26</sup> K. McClure, 'On the Subject of Rights: Pluralism, Plurality and Political Identity,' in C. Mouffe, (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 69.



identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality, aim[s] at constructing a “we”.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, what comes to constitute the radical citizen identity is not an abstract legal status, but an act of *identifying* with the radical democratic version of these principles.<sup>29</sup>

While the base values of liberty and equality are also shared by other conceptions of citizenship, including liberal and communitarian versions, she wants to interpret these principles in a radical democratic way. In the radical democratic interpretation liberty and equality entail an end to domination and subordination through the further democratisation of society. Once these concepts are interpreted according to the radical democratic hegemony, they become the guiding ‘ethico-political principles’ of all those who would call themselves ‘radical democratic citizens’. Mouffe believes that the radical democratic interpretation of these principles can be distinguished from standard liberal accounts of liberty and equality in two ways. Firstly, she conceives these principles as contingent. They are the products of a liberal-democratic tradition and thus they cannot be, as many liberals have attempted, universalised beyond this history.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, they are not neutral principles, as liberals believe, but are open to a number of different interpretations; the radical democratic version is only one interpretation among others.<sup>31</sup>

Mouffe believes that it is important to emphasise the contingency and non-neutrality of these ‘ethico-principles’ because they must be explicitly defended as part of a particular tradition if they are to operate as common political ethics in times of great social diversity. By recognising the contingency of these principles on a particular tradition and thus their partiality, Mouffe argues that we are better placed to *defend* and justify them. Thus for her:

The recognition that [our liberal institutions] do not have an ultimate foundation creates a more favourable terrain for their defence. When we realize that, far from being the necessary result of a moral evolution of mankind, liberal democracy is an ensemble of contingent practices,

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<sup>28</sup> C. Mouffe, ‘Citizenship and Political Identity,’ *op.cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, *op.cit.*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

we can understand that it is a conquest that needs to be protected as well as deepened.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, it is only because these principles are explicitly partial that they *must be* defended. Furthermore, for Mouffe in being partial, the very status of radical democratic citizenship is not set up as an 'empirically given' and it can be legitimately questioned by those who disagree with it.

*The radical democratic identity and non-essentialistic subjectivity*

The idea of anti-essential subjectivity is also a condition for the construction of radical democratic citizenship. It was shown in the last section on postmodernism that Mouffe assumes a radically decentred subject. For Mouffe, it is because the subject is decentred and has multiple identities that the radical citizen identity becomes important. It allows the dispersed subject to find temporary fixity in terms of which it can act in the political sphere, without putting into question its multiple 'private' identities. Thus, she writes that radical democratic citizenship becomes 'an articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent, while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances and for the respect of individual liberty'.<sup>33</sup> It is apparent in this working of citizenship that Mouffe maintains the public/private divide such that the citizen identity becomes a construct demanded by the public-political process, while the citizen enjoys a 'plurality of allegiances' in the private sphere. According to Mouffe, the radical citizen identity is thus never determined entirely by, nor is it determinant of, the subject's personal identities.

This view of citizenship is very important for the anti-essentialist view of personal identity addressed in Chapters One and Two. It means that individuals can have more than one personal and political identity. Indeed, she makes it explicitly clear that they may even choose between different interpretations of citizenship. She says, 'citizenship is vital for democratic politics, but a modern democratic theory must make

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 84.



room for competing conceptions of our identities as citizens'.<sup>34</sup> The important element in Mouffe's work therefore is how radical democratic citizenship works to move subjects from their individualistic, decentred and multiple identities into political collectives with shared concerns - either as members of specific political movements or as citizens in a polity - whilst still allowing for their 'plurality of allegiances'.

#### *The radical democratic citizenship identity and political collectivity*

For Mouffe the ethico-political principles constructed by the radical democratic hegemonic formation allow the subject to adopt a non-deterministic citizen identity. According to Mouffe, to be considered a radical democratic citizen, the subject must adhere to the values of radical democracy - the democratic interpretation of liberty and equality as an end to all relations of subordination through greater democracy. Beyond the sharing of these values, the subject does not need to share a common social or cultural identity with other members of the radical democratic formation.

The openness and non-essentialistic construction of the radical democratic identity, according to Mouffe, allows many different social movements from feminists to ecologists,<sup>35</sup> to come together as radical democrats. This process is possible because:

The common recognition by the different groups struggling for an extension and radicalisation of democracy that they have a common concern...should lead to the articulation of the democratic demands found in a variety of involvements: women, workers, blacks, gays, ecological, as well as other 'new social movements'.<sup>36</sup>

In Mouffe's account, while these groups may have ostensibly different political aims, they will all acknowledge that the values and objectives of radical democracy are the best conditions for their realisation. Therefore, the movements come together for political action in the knowledge that they all share the same radical democratic concern to end oppression through greater democratisation.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> I am not so sure that New Social Movements exist at present in the form that Mouffe presupposes. The radicalism and unity of the black, gay and feminist movements did not extend past the 1970s and 1980s and there was very little unity *between* these movements.

Consequently, Mouffe's view of radical democracy is postmodern theory applied to liberal democratic citizenship to radicalise and re-politicise it. On the one hand, the hegemonic formation of radical democracy is contingently grounded in the Western tradition of liberty and democratic equality. On the other hand, it marries this tradition with the postmodern belief that the subject is decentred, having a number of different identities and thus holding a diverse range of social and political associations. Her view of hegemonic formation accepts moreover that any interpretation of political collectivity is artificial, partial and temporary because it has the precarious task of linking decentred political agents together, whilst acknowledging that each one has many different private allegiances. It is thus a promising model of political coalition for feminists in a new wave when essential female identities have been called into question. In its initial formulation it allows a number of political and personal identities to be juxtaposed, enabling feminists to come to terms with the plurality of social and political identities and, at the same time, theorise a political alliance. It is now necessary to examine the place of women and feminists as radical democratic citizens to consider the extent to which she manages to maintain this plurality.

### **Women, feminism and the question of identity: constructing women as a political collective**

So far it has been shown that the citizen identity is a discursive construct for Mouffe and can be interpreted in many different ways. None of these interpretations of citizenship identity can claim to have a vantage point over society because social relationships are themselves too diverse to be encompassed in a single concept of citizenship. Mouffe's particular vision of citizenship is the radical democratic one, which she believes is useful for women and other marginalised groups in liberal democracies, allowing them to come together in non-deterministic ways to end relations of subordination. It is thus necessary to consider Mouffe's view of the feminist movement in some detail and how the feminist identity will operate in terms

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<sup>36</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 84.



of the radical democratic citizenship identity. It is thus necessary to look at the implications of radical citizenship for women coming together in terms of three types of political identity: as feminists, as radical democrats and as other types of citizens. It will then be possible to address whether the radical citizenship identity remains the 'articulating principle' between these identities, or whether it becomes a privileged, substantive model of citizenship.

### *Women as feminists*

Mouffe premises her analysis of feminism on her anti-essentialist concepts of self and group identity. In fact she is extremely critical of much second wave essentialism, arguing that:

The whole false dilemma of equality-versus-difference is exploded since we no longer have a homogeneous entity 'woman' facing another homogeneous entity 'man', but a multiplicity of social relations in which sexual difference is always constructed in very diverse ways and where the struggle against subordination has to be visualised in specific and differential forms. To ask whether women should become identical to men in order to be recognised as equal, or whether they should assert their difference at the cost of equality, appears meaningless once essential identities are put into question.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, for Mouffe sexual differences should play no part in citizenship<sup>38</sup> and any unity between women is found not by returning to these essentialistic visions, but by looking across discourses to expose a 'common effect' in the various ways in which woman/women are categorised.<sup>39</sup> Once this is found, she believes that, in her words, 'partial fixations can take place and precarious forms of identification can be established around the category 'women' which provide the basis for a feminist identity and a feminist struggle'.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, Mouffe presents a picture of women's commonality *as feminists* that has much in common with Iris Young's

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>39</sup> C. Mouffe, 'The Sex/ Gender System and the Discursive Construction of Women's Subordination,' in S. Hanninen and L. Paldan (eds.), *Rethinking Ideology: A Marxist Debate*, (Berlin, New York and Bagnolet: Argument - Sonderband AS 84 and International General IMMRC, 1983) p. 141.

<sup>40</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 87.

model of serial collectivity discussed in Chapter Four.<sup>41</sup> In accordance with this view, Mouffe argues that 'unity [between women] should be the result of a construction of common interests and goals. It must be the result of a political struggle...to create a new political subject through hegemony'.<sup>42</sup> In this account feminism becomes a *political identity* and not a social bond of identification.

Mouffe's rejection of essentialism allows her to portray feminism as a movement ripe for radical democratic hegemony. She believes that the second wave's essentialist concepts of identity are no longer valid, leaving the movement loose, fragmented and pluralised. This level of fragmentation is crucial if feminists are to turn to radical democratic citizenship. As she writes,

for those feminists committed to a radical democratic politics, the deconstruction of essential identities should be seen as a necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the variety of social relationships where the principles of liberty and equality should apply.<sup>43</sup>

On these terms, radical democratic citizenship becomes the artificial political bond to unite feminists in the face of their fragmentation. For Mouffe, feminists groups are also suitable for radical democratic hegemony because, despite their fragmentation, they remain committed to its ethico-principles': they too want to further the democratic values of liberty and equality and end all relations of subordination through increased democratisation.

### *Feminists as radical democratic citizens*

For Mouffe, feminists must seek out radical democratic citizenship to ensure the openness and anti-essentialist status of their movement. Indeed, Mouffe explicitly argues against the political specificity of the feminist movement, suggesting that to centre on anything other than an end to general relations of subordination is to essentialise women, to chase a vision of inherent 'womanhood' or femininity. As she

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Chapter Four, pp. 155-157.

<sup>42</sup> C. Mouffe, 'The Sex/ Gender System and the Discursive Construction of Women's Subordination,' op.cit., p. 142.

<sup>43</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 76-77.



argues, 'feminist politics should be understood not as a separate form of politics designed to pursue the interests of women *as* women, but rather as the pursuit of feminist goals and aims within the context of a wider articulation of demands' (Mouffe's italics).<sup>44</sup> According to Mouffe, feminists join with other movements by forming 'chains of equivalence' with them and following common objectives.<sup>45</sup> These 'chains of equivalence' allow feminists to link with ecology, gay rights and anti-racist movements in an alliance. Hence, according to Mouffe, all share the desire to end relations of subordination and essentialism, and to increase democracy.<sup>46</sup> However, within the alliance structure provided by the 'chains of equivalence' the groups will remain distinct from one another. As Mouffe insists, 'a relation of equivalence does not eliminate difference'.<sup>47</sup> For Mouffe there is no problem in undermining the specificity of the feminist movement through the 'chains of equivalence', because she believes that radical movements will share a common sense of oppression. Yet, historical experience suggests that these movements often find their aims in conflict with each other and have thus resisted amalgamation into any kind of alliance.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, then, Mouffe's account of the radical democratic hegemony does not examine the serious possibility of incommensurable conflicts of interests between different radical movements.

It would seem therefore that her radical democratic concept of citizenship, that will bind the groups in a political alliance, is more substantive than her idea of it as an 'articulating principle' would suggest.<sup>49</sup> In this view, it will be remembered, citizenship is not itself meant to be a privileged concept of identity; it is merely a discursive device to order a subject's personal identity for political action. However, this idea of an insubstantive, discursive citizen identity does not hold when she

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Citizenship and Political Identity,' op.cit., p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 88.

<sup>47</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Citizenship and Political Identity,' op.cit., p. 31-32.

<sup>48</sup> It is widely acknowledged, after all, that in America and Britain women felt excluded by male-dominated, radical movements in the 1960s and were further impelled into forming their own separate movement.

<sup>49</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., pp. 69-70.

theorises the radical democratic collective, whereby, to produce this collective, the radical citizenship identity must surely be substantive enough to, if not override, at least manage the differences between the ecology movement, the women's movement, the black movement etc. Thus, on her account, the differences between movements may remain, but they do not seem to matter in the political collectivity of radical democracy, becoming erased in the fight against opposition forces.<sup>50</sup> Noël O'Sullivan shares these doubts about maintaining diversity in light of the ethico-principles of radical democracy and he suggests that Mouffe may be hankering after the same sort of utopian rainbow coalition that Iris Young has sought.<sup>51</sup>

It should also be noted that feminism itself is in need of some alliance building before it would be ready for inclusion in the wider radical democratic alliance.<sup>52</sup> The analysis of Chapter Two details the diversity of the feminist movement after the second wave. This diversity suggests that while most feminists would support a commitment to liberty and equality, it is not so clear that they would also support the radical democratic interpretation of these principles or the alignment with other social movements that is concomitant of a support for them. Consequently, by placing feminism in the radical democratic collective, Mouffe eliminates the differences within feminism. She moves the common basis for membership in a feminist movement from identity to the sharing of radical democratic values without realising that this itself might be essentialising. This vision is not feminist politics but feminism translated into radical democratic citizenship. Hence, Mouffe is right that feminism should not be based on essentialistic identities and that, moreover, a form of feminist movement can still exist without positing women as an essentialised social group. However, the possibility of a non-essential movement does not mean that feminist groups must give up their *separate* and specific struggles. Indeed, to take this

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<sup>50</sup> C. Mouffe, *ibid.*, p. 84, writes, 'it is only in so far as democratic differences are opposed to forces or discourses which negate all of them that the differences can be substituted for each other.'

<sup>51</sup> N. O'Sullivan, 'Difference and the Concept of the Political in Contemporary Political Philosophy,' *Political Studies*, Vol. XLV (1997), p. 751.



approach is to undermine the differences between feminists and the need for feminists to continually renegotiate who they represent. There is also a danger that the specificity of feminists' interests and demands would be lost in the radical democratic hegemony: either being subsumed by vague objectives that would link say the ecology movement with the feminist movement, or becoming marginalised in a more general political struggle for greater democracy.

*Women as radical democratic citizens: maintaining their 'plurality of allegiances'*

By undermining the specificity of feminism in the radical democratic 'hegemonic formation,' Mouffe eliminates a potential political allegiance for women beyond that of radical democratic citizenship. On her account, even in their feminist activities, women get channelled into a radical democratic collective. Thus, it was suggested that her propensity to override the specificity of the feminist, and other movements, for the radical democratic identity indicates that her view of citizenship is actually more substantive than this idea. Indeed, Mouffe goes on to explicitly defend her vision of radical democratic citizenship as a substantive, transformative political identity. She argues that it is a 'common political identity that would create the conditions for the establishment of a new hegemony'. She adds that 'this cannot be achieved without the transformation of existing subject positions'.<sup>53</sup> In this statement it becomes clear that for Mouffe the radical democratic citizenship identity is a transformative political identity.

Once the idea of radical democratic citizenship is theorised in such a substantive manner, a problem emerges that make it less than ideal for women seeking a variety of political identities as both feminists and as citizens. This problem is the concern, first raised in relation to Benhabib and Young's works, that radical and deliberative political models cannot guarantee that the political process will be

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<sup>52</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 88, does note that 'there are...by necessity many feminisms,' which makes it even harder to understand how this multiplicity would link in with other social movements.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

transformative. As it was shown with Young and Benhabib, any call for transformative political identities necessarily undermines pre-existing identities, interests and political claims. By insisting that the radical democratic hegemony is a transformative political identity, Mouffe undermines the contingent basis of political identity on private interests. Yet Mouffe also argues that these identities have validity, they are the contingent context of citizens' public, political claims. As she puts it 'the wants, choices and decisions are private because they are the responsibility of each individual'.<sup>54</sup> If these private wants and choices are to be protected in the political settlement, then the transformative process to create the radical democratic citizen identity could never be completed. Thus, Mouffe needs to be more cautious in suggesting that the radical democratic citizen identity can be completely transformative, if she is to avoid denying the contingency of political identities and the strength with which people hold their social identities and interests. The best that can be achieved is that these sorts of identities can be strategically constituted for political engagement, but they cannot be erased by the political identity itself.

Moreover, there is the worry that the 'new identity', could it be created, would make it difficult for the political subject to hold a 'plurality of allegiances' at the private and social level. Women, for example, might find that they hold a plurality of allegiances that need a number of outlets at the citizenship level. They might feel that these are compromised once they are submitted to the substantive project of radical democratic citizenship. Mouffe actually recognises the problem of balancing the new citizen identity with the private and diverse identities of each citizen, asking how people could be encompassed in a new construction of citizen identity 'without being forced to abandon their own identity'.<sup>55</sup>

In sum, Mouffe's vision of radical democratic citizenship has three problems for feminists in a new wave - who wish to protect the diversity of women's political identities. First, she still hopes, despite her emphasis on antagonism and conflict, for a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 72

<sup>55</sup> C. Mouffe 'Politics, Democratic Action, and Solidarity,' op.cit., p. 106.



transformative political settlement in which all actors become radical democratic citizens. Secondly, a tension arises in her work. On the one hand, she continues to affirm a feminist politics, whereas, on the other hand, she denies the specificity of the feminist identity for women by merging it with the more general radical democratic collective. Thirdly, the radical democratic citizen identity emerges as a substantive view of political solidarity, as opposed to her premise that it is no more than an 'articulating principle' to bind citizens together for political action. It ultimately sets out a definite political project – ending all relations of subordination and furthering democratisation – to which citizens must give their commitment at the expense of their other political concerns. These problems are not fully solved by her agonal political settlement.

### **The radical democratic citizen and agonal democracy**

So far it has been suggested that Mouffe's view of radical democratic citizenship is not fully suitable for her view of feminist politics as plural, diverse and non-essentialistic. Her vision of radical democratic citizenship mirrors Young's assumption that diverse groups can politically come together in a transformative manner so that their differences cease to matter. However, Mouffe, unlike Young, should not be immediately charged with irrevocable political utopianism because she acknowledges that the radical democratic interpretation of citizenship is only one among many and that, 'there can be as many forms of citizenship as there are interpretations of those [ethico-political] principles'.<sup>56</sup> On a sympathetic reading this proviso means that Mouffe must acknowledge that women can be citizens outside of the radical democratic hegemony and in terms of a number of different elements of their identity. It is the recognition of such diverse forms of citizenship and the political conflict they might bring that lies behind her recent move to agonal democracy. She argues that agonal democracy is a site not only for the propagation of radical citizenship, but also for recognising and acknowledging other conflicting types of

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<sup>56</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 84.

citizenship. This makes her model of agonal democracy extremely important and it must be examined separately to her view of radical democratic citizenship.<sup>57</sup>

Mouffe's model of agonal democracy is a mixture of the communitarian and liberal democratic models of democracy. She believes that communitarian theories and the ideal of civic republicanism on which they are based are important because they emphasise the ethical nature of politics and the need for citizens to participate.<sup>58</sup> However, she criticises recent communitarians, such as Sandel, Michael Walzer and Alistair MacIntyre, for premising their democratic models on the idea of the citizen as a unitary subject. She cautions that it is not enough for communitarians to reject the autonomous, abstract self, favoured by many liberals, but replace it with a vision of the united, situated and encumbered self, because this latter view is also an overly simplistic account of human subjectivity.<sup>59</sup> For Mouffe, then, both these accounts of selfhood miss the extent to which the subject is decentred and multiple. Hence, although Mouffe, like the communitarians, also wants to go beyond the liberal tradition of citizenship, in which the individual is no more than a legal entity, she does not want to privilege the citizen identity as the good life. To privilege citizenship in this manner would be to determine and fix the subject in terms of only one aspect of their identity. Mouffe instead wants to ensure that 'the identities qua individual and qua citizen are preserved, and none is sacrificed to the other; they coexist in a permanent tension...between liberty and equality, which is constitutive of modern pluralist democracy and whose resolution would lead to its destruction'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Mouffe's model of agonal democracy is still being developed and it not yet clear how it will be integrated with her earlier view of radical democratic citizenship and radical democracy. There are, of course, similarities between her models of radical and agonal democracy, both are concerned with the conflictual nature of political processes and how to include diverse and excluded political actors. However, what marks out the recent shift in her thought is her exploration of 'agon' in politics and the implications it has for political relationships and institutions. Indeed, Mouffe's shift to agonal democracy has also seen her address more conventional political institutions such as political parties and parliamentary models as opposed to the New Social Movements that marked out her earlier work both singularly and with Laclau.

<sup>58</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., pp. 61-63.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Citizenship and Political Identity,' op.cit., p. 32.



To maintain this tension, she believes that some features of the modern liberal democratic tradition should be preserved. For Mouffe the most important contributions of the liberal democratic tradition have been 'the defence of pluralism, the idea of individual liberty, the separation of Church and State, the development of civil society ... a distinction ... between the private and the public domains'.<sup>61</sup> Without these elements there is a risk, according to Mouffe, that pure civic republicanism is an ancient model of democracy that, privileges the common, citizen identity above the private, individual one.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, Mouffe hopes agonal democracy will avoid both the liberal privileging of private, pre-political identities and the civic republican valorising of the citizen identity as the highest form of identification for any subject; the latter being an identity that triumphs over private wants and needs in favour of the common good.<sup>63</sup>

The issue of citizenship is made more difficult for Mouffe because she believes that 'modern democracy is characterised precisely by the absence of a substantive common good'.<sup>64</sup> Hence, in the agonal model the collective nature of citizenship has to be based on something other than this impossible ideal of the common good or the deliberative ideal of consensus. Here she turns to the Oakeshottian model of civil association to consider how common rules of citizenship can be formulated that do not depend on citizens sharing common interests, identities or even the same conception of citizenship, and that thus allow the citizen to remain decentred. From Oakeshott's model she appropriates the idea of "*respublica*". These are the shared rules of democratic and political action that guide civil conduct. They are contingent on the democratic tradition out of which they arise and amount not to a common good, but to a common 'public concern' that when the citizen acts in public they will abide with the "*respublica*".<sup>65</sup> Put simply, fellow citizens need have nothing in common other than that they abide by these rules in their political conduct. As

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<sup>61</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Politics, Democratic Action, and Solidarity,' op.cit., p. 100.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>64</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 64.

Mouffe writes, '[t]he identification with those rules of civil intercourse [*respublica*] creates a common political identity among persons otherwise engaged in many different enterprises'.<sup>66</sup> With these rules of conduct in place, citizens can follow many different interpretations of citizenship and hold many different 'ethico-principles' - of which Mouffe favours the radical democratic view. However, not all conceptions of citizenship are valid according to the rules of democratic life and those that are not based on liberty and equality are excluded as being the antithesis of the democratic tradition.

Given that no concept of citizenship can be privileged, the political sphere for Mouffe is constantly being contested. Hence, it needs a model of democracy and a set of democratic institutions that can accommodate this range of citizenship. She argues that the agonal model of democracy is the best model to deal with this sort of conflict and diversity. In the agonal model the aim of the political process is precisely to 'transform antagonism into agonism'.<sup>67</sup> She adds that when a previously antagonistic relationship between citizens becomes an agonal one, '[the] opponent...is no longer considered an enemy to be destroyed but somebody whose existence is legitimate and whose rights will not be put into question'.<sup>68</sup> In short, the agonal model moves a social relationship of outright hostility to one of legitimate political inclusion.

Like other current theorists of agonal democracy, such as Bonnie Honnig,<sup>69</sup> she also wants to encourage the 'agnostic dynamic' in politics as a sign of healthy democratic life.<sup>70</sup> For Mouffe it brings conflict, passion, rhetoric and a concern for a common ethical life into the democratic process.<sup>71</sup> Once these elements of politics have been accepted, Mouffe argues that a revitalised politics will appear in which

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 67, here Mouffe uses Oakeshott's concept of '*respublica*' which are themselves based on Wittgenstein's idea of a 'shared grammar'. In both cases the rules set out the shared criteria for action but do not force citizens to act or prescribe the substance of these actions.

<sup>67</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Politics, Democratic Action, and Solidarity,' op.cit., p. 99.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>69</sup> B. Honnig, 'Difference, Dilemmas and the Politics of Home,' in S. Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference*, op.cit., pp. 257-277.

<sup>70</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 6.



participation and political action are widespread, and which is continually renewed by the emergence of new political conflicts. These new conflicts both regenerate the agonal model and prevent it from ever being finalised: finality being a perfect, conflict-free utopia. As Mouffe writes of agonal democracy, 'conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realisation'.<sup>72</sup> The agonal model is therefore contingent on new conflicts emerging.

Seyla Benhabib, however, distrusts this overt privileging of conflictual and agonal citizenship and makes two salient objections to it. She first asks how Mouffe, and other agonal theorists, can ensure that the democratic tradition they contingently base their politics on is a just one. She asks, 'how can theorists of agnostic democracy safeguard freedom, justice and respect for the rights of citizens as free and equal beings, if they are unwilling to place some constraints ...[on] the will of the sovereign people?'<sup>73</sup> Mouffe however, as will be examined later, does place constraints on 'the will of the sovereign people and does not assume that they will automatically make just decisions. Hence, she accepts the necessity of institutional mechanisms to order and protect the political process, and allow decisions to be made in the face of conflict.

Benhabib's second objection to Mouffe (and other agonal theorists) is that she has no 'coherent theory of rights'<sup>74</sup> at the base of her citizenship, thus leaving it up to the whims of the political contest to see if the political actor will be included or not. Mouffe would respond, however, that her agonal model does have such a theory, but that these are contingent on specific modern democratic traditions of liberty and equality and are not necessarily universalisable.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Mouffe does not shy away from the fact that the lack of any foundational guarantees for these rights makes them contestable. She makes it clear therefore that anyone who called these rights into

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<sup>71</sup> C. Mouffe, *ibid.*, p. 65, argues that it is necessary to 're-establish the lost connections between ethics and politics'.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> S. Benhabib, 'The Democratic Moment and the Problem of Difference,' in S. Benhabib, (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>75</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, *op.cit.*, p. 19, explicitly states that a theory of democratic rights is essential in a modern pluralist democracy.

question would be excluded from agonal democracy, though not from promoting their own interpretation of the citizen identity.

However, the agonal model is still problematic for women as feminists and citizens. It valorises participation and is legitimated by civic commitment rather than formal political procedures. Women, as it was argued in Chapter One, do not always have the time for extensive political participation and need other more minimal ways of being involved. The other problem is whether Mouffe successfully reconciles her view of radical, antagonistic and subversive citizenship with a clear vision of the political institutions that could contain and manage these conflicts. Hence, while Mouffe does value the place of some liberal-democratic institutions to provide political order, she does not theorise why feminists or other radical democratic and subversive groups would support such institutions and not see them as indicative of the general and oppressive social order. Thus, Mouffe needs to explicitly theorise the legitimacy of these institutions for radical groups, who historically, at least, have not supported liberal democratic political institutions. Without this amendment, her work risks glorifying contest for radical groups as the only legitimate form of political action, above the importance of decision-making and compromise.

Despite these criticisms of Mouffe's work, her model of agonal democracy is still extremely important for new wave feminism because of its central concept of the 'political'. For Mouffe what ultimately marks out her agonal model of democracy from both communitarian and liberal democratic versions is its view of the political as a distinct type of human action and relationship. She believes that it is necessary to re-introduce this concept to democratic citizenship to revitalise and make explicit the specificity of political life. This concept of the 'political' will be extracted from her work and examined from its roots in Schmitt and Oakeshott's theories, through to her own political vision. It is then possible to set out the concept's implications for feminism in a new wave.

## **Reintroducing the Political**



Mouffe's concept of the political draws on the work of Carl Schmitt and Michael Oakeshott to introduce a distinct vision of the political and politics as an activity. It suggests that the political relationship occurs when the subject faces others who may not share their values but with whom they must co-exist with and come to a decision with. She summarises this concept thus, 'political life concerns collective, public action; it aims at the construction of a 'we' in a context of diversity and conflict'.<sup>76</sup> Following Mouffe's view of the political in agonal democracy, it is possible to draw out four characteristics of the political: the 'public' nature of the political, the constructed nature of collective political identity, the dialectic of conflict and authoritative decision making in the political process, and the contingent basis of the political. These characteristics will be examined in turn.

#### *The public nature of the political*

The first characteristic of the political that Mouffe, along with Oakeshott and Schmitt, specifies is that it is in some sense *public*. It is not public in the impossible sense that some liberal thinkers have aimed for as a process that is entirely separate to the private. Rather, the political is public because it is aimed at, and in terms of, 'Others': those who are not familiar or similar to oneself. In other words, it is directed at strangers, although not always at opponents. Following Oakeshott she sums up the public/private divide in the political as, 'the wants, choices and decisions are private because they are the responsibility of each individual, but the performances are public because they are required to subscribe to the conditions specified in *respublica*'.<sup>77</sup> This political definition of the public/private divide is a better response to Mouffe's postmodern political strategy than her vision of radical democratic citizenship for two reasons.

First, it accords with her anti-essentialist demands, enabling the individual to have a 'plurality of allegiances'. As the quotation above indicated, the individual may

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

have a number of different private wants that are not overridden by the public-political identity. Secondly, in contrast to the radical democratic view of citizenship, the public-political identity is contingent on the private and pre-existing interests of the individual; they are simply given a different dimension as they become public via the political process. She does not assume, as she does in her vision of radical democratic citizenship, that these pre-existing interests, and more generally any pre-existing identities, will be automatically transformed by the political relationship. In her agonal vision, therefore, the political relationship is more minimal. In becoming public the demands of the individual are not transformed. They are simply given an additional dimension because they must be defended in accordance with the common institutions and rules - the "*respublica*"<sup>78</sup> - by which citizens co-exist. Consequently, she does not assume a solidaristic relationship between citizens as she does with those citizens united by a common concern with radical democratic citizenship. Rather, the *starting point* of the political is a relation of co-existence and, at worst, hostility. The potential for transformation, on these terms, can only be the *result* of the political process.

### *The political and collectivity*

The second related characteristic of the political is that it is in some sense about a constructed, artificial and temporary *collective* identity. Hence, in agonal democracy the political bond is never a substantive bond of solidarity based on a shared sense of the common good. It is, by contrast, a formal relationship constructed around the sharing of the contingent values of liberal democracy and the *respublica* that guide political conduct. The political relationship becomes an artificial bond constructed for political and public relationships and does not assume a shared social identity.

However, the moment the democratic values of liberty and equality are constructed as a basis for a political collective, they become partial. Some people will

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<sup>78</sup> C. Mouffe, *ibid.*, pp. 67-69, borrows the concept of '*respublica*' from Oakeshott's work. It refers to the body of civil laws, rules, and in Mouffe's interpretation values, that govern and guide - but do not determine - how citizens act in the polity. She thus defines it as, 'a specific language of civil



not agree with this interpretation of them. Mouffe therefore makes the Schmittian recognition that the need for a collective identity automatically introduces conflict into the political. In Schmitt's work whenever a political collective, a "we", is identified, then an enemy, a "them", emerges.<sup>79</sup> For Schmitt this process is the actual moment of the 'political'. Mouffe agrees with Schmitt therefore that there can be no political coming together without the designation of what the political collective is *not*.

The challenge for Mouffe's agonal concept of the political, and why she moves it on from Schmitt's more warlike definition of politics, is to provide a political voice for the 'them' without excluding, oppressing or marginalising such dissent.<sup>80</sup> Her response to this is entirely sensible and she recognises the importance of political institutions in legitimating adversarial relations. As she puts it, it is necessary to undertake 'the legitimation of conflict and the creation of institutions whose aim is to transform *antagonism* into *agonism* (Mouffe's italics)'.<sup>81</sup> However, despite embracing the 'other' as a legitimate rival through political institutions, Mouffe does make it clear that there is always an ultimate incommensurability. At this point the "them" becomes an "enemy" and rejects not only the values of the polity but also its institutions.<sup>82</sup> With this rejection the political relationship breaks down and is either renegotiated or transformed. Hence, for Mouffe the political process of coming together is always characterised by inescapable conflict, that both allows for the political to occur and makes it inherently vulnerable.

### *Conflict, decision-making and the political*

The political collective cannot be a unified whole. It will always face dissent and hostility. This feature of the political is recognised by Mouffe, Oakeshott and Schmitt.

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intercourse'. It finds expression in explicit constitutions and procedures, as well as more diffuse value systems.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 114-115.

<sup>81</sup> C. Mouffe, 'Politics, Democratic Action, and Solidarity,' op.cit., p. 108.

<sup>82</sup> C. Mouffe, ibid., p. 107, states, 'the category of the 'enemy' does not disappear; it now refers to those who do not accept the set of values constitutive of the democratic forms of life, and reject their basic institutions'.

All three thinkers, to some extent, accept that diversity produces *conflict* and antagonism. For Oakeshott, diversity means that the political cannot be defined in terms of one purpose or a particular conception of the common good.<sup>83</sup> For Mouffe, the antagonism produced by social diversity constantly threatens to subvert any political settlement and limits any hope of a utopian transparent and unified society.<sup>84</sup>

However, Mouffe makes it clear that conflict never completely sunders the political. It is not simply a moment of war or open conflict, but is actually limited by 'decision'. According to Mouffe, political decision-making cannot be the rational consensus of the deliberative model because 'conflict and antagonism... indicate precisely the limits of rational consensus, the fact that every consensus is by necessity based on acts of exclusion'.<sup>85</sup> What distinguishes 'political' decision-making from consensus, is that the decision always takes place in the context of the possible emergence of conflict and thus it can only be tenuous and transitory. Political decision is as Mouffe argues the "undecidable decided".<sup>86</sup> In fact, it can be said that if decision is not made in such a context of conflict and diversity it ceases to be political. For if all had reached consensus on the decision, there would be no need to 'weight' the decision, so to speak and make it authoritative by specifying a sanction for breaching the decision. It is only when the decision is made knowing that it could be contested, that it is necessary to make it authoritative, it then becomes a political decision.

### *Contingency and the political*

It has been shown so far that the political does not refer to a solid, separate sphere of human relationships but to a dimension to human action. Hence, for Mouffe, the political is seen in very Aristotelian terms as a 'dimension that is inherent to every

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<sup>83</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 67.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 152.



human society and that determines our very ontological condition'.<sup>87</sup> On these terms, anything can be political if it is presented publicly; there is nothing that is to be seen as inherently a private matter for the private sphere. Thus, a concern becomes political if it is defended, justified or discussed with those who may not necessarily agree. Consequently, what emerges from Mouffe's reading of Schmitt and Oakeshott and her own postmodern concerns is a concept of the political as momentary, performative and thoroughly contingent. For Oakeshott, the political is always contingent, depending on action and utterance to continually 're-enact' the 'language of civil understanding'.<sup>88</sup> When this discourse is not being enacted then there is no political. Similarly, for Mouffe the political is discursively constructed as the moment of hegemonic formation, the moment that citizens come together to act in public. In both cases a political regime is never a necessary occurrence, but a reaction to a contingent set of events that changes from one moment to the next as new social antagonisms emerge. Indeed, Mouffe says of democracy that it, 'is something uncertain and improbable and must never be taken for granted'.<sup>89</sup> Hence, the political identity and the political concerns of citizens will change in this contingent process. The political on this reading, therefore, cannot prescribe the content of politics or the substance of political identities because it is a contingent dimension to human activity that emerges when groups or individuals face each other to make their demands in public. It does not specify what these demands should be or who should be participating in the political process, these will be decided contingently in a particular social context.

Thus, a concept of the political is developed by and through Mouffe that is characterised by publicity, collectivity, conflict and decision, and contingency. These are all remarkably useful for feminists in a new wave and point to a form of politics that is more limited than the one desired by the deliberative versions of democracy favoured by Benhabib and Young. These amended versions of deliberative democracy are not amenable to the dimension of the political because they are not open to the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>88</sup> M. Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 122.

political as a place of conflict. Benhabib and Young displace conflict, believing, respectively, in either ultimate consensus or an initial consensus over procedure. Furthermore, deliberative democracy is not open to the political in the sense of publicness. It is a democratic model in which the subject confronts those who are inherently similar to it, i.e. other rational, autonomous agents. Or, in Young's reading of it, the other is made familiar due to the transformative effects of the democratic process of confrontation.

Hence, Mouffe's vision of the political is a better response to feminism after fragmentation than these models. It recognises contingency, anti-essentialism and anti-utopianism that mark out the current conditions of feminist theory. However, while Mouffe has gradually developed her model of agonal democracy and its underlying concept of the political, she has not, as yet, theorised feminism outside of the project of radical democratic citizenship. Given the problems with the radical democratic view of citizenship for feminists, in that it denies the specificity of their movement, it would be useful to go beyond Mouffe's work and delimit the implications of her concept of the political for feminists in a new wave.

### **Feminism and the Political**

It would be fruitful to use the concept of the political found in Mouffe's work and expand it to restate the importance of the political for feminists in a new wave. When the political is reintroduced to feminism it is not a question of defining what feminism will speak about for it is too fragmented, too diverse, to be prescribed in this way. The political is restated instead as a *dimension* to feminist discourses that many second wave feminists have been blind to in their emphasis on identity politics. This dimension is about the public confrontation of others who are not familiar or similar to oneself. It expects a difficult and complex process that cannot fully satisfy quests for identity formation, because such quests, as it was suggested in the study of second wave feminism, are based on relations of sympathy, solidarity and often 'sameness'. It

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<sup>89</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, op.cit., p. 6.



is still possible to take issues of identity into the political process, and indeed many feminists will continue to want this sort of politics. However, it must be accepted that it is utopian to expect harmonious, identitarian political relationships in which all actors share the same identity. Ultimately, a subject can only seek secure affirmation, reassurance and sympathy for her identity among those with whom she is familiar with or similar to, and this situation is not a characteristic of the political. It is thus necessary to take the four features of Mouffe's concept of the political – the idea that it is a 'public' process, a constructed collective identity, conflict and decision-making, and contingency - to address their implications for feminism as a political discourse in a new wave.

### *Feminism and the 'public' nature of the political*

The public nature of the political in this regard does not refer simply to a 'public' sphere facing a 'private' sphere. Rather it designates the political as a dimension of human relationships that occurs when we face and make demands on others who are not similar to us but with whom we must coexist anyway. This 'public' relationship can occur in any social or even private space, what matters is the relationship of 'otherness', the sense that political agreement cannot be assumed. As Iris Young states, 'politics must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across time and difference'.<sup>90</sup> This is the public nature of the political and it can take place in any sphere or institution where we make our demands to strangers.

For feminists it is necessary to embrace the public nature of the political, to stop rejecting it as a space/place created by males. Unless this sense of the 'publicness' of all political relations is accepted, utopian and separatist dreams of

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<sup>90</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 234. However, unlike Young, I do not believe that any political model can transcend our stranger status; this remains the limit to all models of democracy.

'women-centred' politics and knowledge will continue.<sup>91</sup> In these visions feminists have demanded political processes that are women-only, so that they do not confront their supposed male 'enemies'. While these separatist relationships of mutual sympathy and support have been important in empowering women, they have not been strictly political. Indeed, feminists who chose separatism often withdrew from political confrontation altogether and saw their demands become re-marginalised. Hence, the public nature of the political does not prescribe the content of feminist discourse, but does make it clear that their demands must be made in public. It is up to individual feminists though to decide whether they want to subject their hopes of identity affirmation to the public nature of the political given that it is often a hostile and unsettling meeting of strangers.

### *Constructing a feminist political identity*

The second feature of the concept of the political drawn from Mouffe's work is that the political collective and political identity is constructed as part of the political strategy itself. It is not just assumed on the basis of pre-existing social relationships. Hence, private identities and interests will be the impetus to start a political process, to create a political identity. However, the process in itself will strategically shape these identities for the public confrontation of others who may not share them. Again feminists moving into the new wave must be aware that they have to construct women as a feminist political grouping. There is no natural social group of women on which to base feminist political practise. In the new wave, feminists will have to, as part of their political strategy, establish links between women and build alliances. These alliances moreover will have to be painstakingly pieced together and will require more than the process of consciousness raising that often proved to be so homogenising and exclusionary in the second wave.

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<sup>91</sup> I am not denigrating attempts to find women-only spaces. Indeed, women-only spaces are important for social support and solidarity. I am merely noting that these are not properly political, especially if it is expected that all women in them will share the same values.



The process of building a feminist alliance would at least allow feminists to galvanise behind single-issue campaigns. Moreover, coming together with such a minimal sense of unity may be preferable to endless fights over the true meaning of feminist politics that has often further fragmented the remains of the second wave movement. It is possible to qualify this sense of a minimal alliance and note that it refers only to the political side of feminism and is necessary if we want any sort of unity. It does not define feminism as a social project. What is envisioned in this process therefore is the sort of unity, if looser, of a political party - such as the British Labour Party - that comes together *strategically* to win elections but still retains a number of different 'wings' and traditions within the general organisation. In short, feminism like the British Labour Party is a broad church.

The constructed nature of political collectivity, and the hard task of strategically building and defending it, also points to something beyond Mouffe's political vision. This is the concern that feminist politics must have a concept of representation in the alliance to indicate that it cannot be or speak for all women. Mouffe's dismissal of the specificity of the feminist project means that she never explicitly considers how feminists would need to build alliances among themselves, let alone as radical democrats. In the next chapter a more general model of representative democracy will be proposed as a useful democratic model for feminists in a new wave. Representative democracy will be seen to provide the plurality of political institutions that will be necessary should the tenuous feminist coalition breakdown, as well as a concept of representation with which to constitute a feminist alliance.

### *Feminism and the recognition of conflict*

The third aspect of the political is the ever-present possibility of conflict in politics. This conflict extends to identities, interests and interpretations of values. The picture of the fragmentation of the second wave portrayed in Chapters One and Two indicates that feminist theories and politics are in the throes of such political conflict. Hence, feminists in the new wave must be concerned to 'come to terms' with the conflict that

has arisen. They must engage with the reasons for conflict and think about the ways in which it can be managed, both in the internal dynamics of competing 'feminisms' and in terms of women and feminists finding political inclusion as citizens and as feminists.

The idea of conflict also signifies the extent to which politics is inextricably entangled with power relations, such that value systems and interests become entrenched and conflictual when they are presented politically. For feminists, then, to recognise conflict is also to recognise that their own politics are beset by power relations, as Jane Flax has noted, 'we [feminists] need to learn to make claims on our own and others' behalf...knowing that ultimately there is nothing that justifies them beyond each person's own desire and need and the discursive practices in which these are developed'.<sup>92</sup> As Flax's statement suggests, feminists must learn to make demands and state their interests without presenting them as objective, neutral discourses that all rational people will agree on. For Flax this also encourages feminists to take responsibility for the power inherent in their claims and the conflict they may cause. If feminists do not recognise their own power demands, they face potential disillusion and frustration as they politically engage with others who do not agree with them.<sup>93</sup>

### *Feminism, contingency and decision*

Finally, the political is also characterised by contingent decision-making, without which conflict is meaningless. For Mouffe there is conflict because decisions have been made that momentarily fix social and political relations. Once fixed, new antagonisms emerge to challenge them.<sup>94</sup> However, decisions can be made in the face of diversity and extreme value pluralism, through a political process that ensures that they are also temporary and contestable. Again this idea is important in allowing

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<sup>92</sup> J. Flax, 'The End of Innocence' in J. Butler and J.W. Scott (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 460.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 458-460.

<sup>94</sup> C. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, *op.cit.*, pp. 151-152.



feminists to shake off utopian hopes of consensus and come together as a temporary alliance, avoiding the debilitating practise of fracturing into smaller and smaller feminist groups to obtain a lasting consensus. Once more, the concepts of representation and representative democracy will play roles in this decision-making, providing the sort of institutions and mechanisms necessary for short-term and authoritative decisions to be made.

Thus, the political on these terms is obviously a limit on many feminist discourses as they seek re-establishment in the face of fragmentation. But it could be the first step in re-establishing feminism as a political discourse in a new wave. The next step is to establish a model of democracy that will do greater justice to the political than Benhabib, Young or Mouffe's visions. These feminists have all faltered in providing a model of democracy that captures the distinctive elements of the political by expecting transformative political situations, denying the role of interests in politics and expecting extensive citizen participation. In the next chapter, a generic model and defence of representation and representative democracy will be developed that addresses the needs of feminists in a new wave, allowing for a range of political identities for women.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter Mouffe's ideas on radical democratic citizenship and agonal democracy were addressed to see if they were suitable for feminism in a new wave. It was shown that both these elements of her work repeated some of the problems of Benhabib and Young's political models, relying on the democratic confrontation to produce a transformation in social relations and identities. While her model of citizenship was problematic, Mouffe's more recent work on agonal democracy is underpinned by a concept of the political that is characterised by publicity, conflict, contingent decision-making and the construction of political identities. This view of the political is useful for feminists in a new wave allowing them to re-engage politically after the utopian and separatist dreams of the second wave. However,

because Mouffe has not extended this view of the political to feminism, it was developed and explored to see how it could meet new wave feminist concerns. It was thus suggested that to capture the political, feminists must be strategic, building temporary alliances and accepting the interest-based nature of their demands. They must also expect conflict in the political process and be prepared to make compromises in the knowledge that all decisions are provisional. Thus, it will be contended in the next chapter that to fully incorporate the political, feminists need to develop clear conceptions of representation and representative democracy. These will provide a background of mechanisms and institutions for feminists and women facing the tumultuous and conflictual nature of the political, in their own alliances and as citizens in wider democratic processes.



## **Chapter Six. Feminism and the Concept of Representative Democracy**

### **Introduction**

Since the fragmentation of the second wave feminist movement, many feminists have been re-evaluating women's political identity and collectivity. This process has been going on for over a decade and it is now possible to say that feminism is on the edge of a new wave. Postmodern discourses have played an important part in bringing about this new wave. As the study of Chapter Two concludes, a postmodern approach to feminism demands a twofold process. On the one hand feminists must come to terms with the fragmentation of the feminist movement and reconceptualise it as an alliance or coalition rather than a sisterhood. On the other hand, the postmodern approach calls for feminists to recognise the precarious nature of their politics. Consequently, if feminists understand the postmodern position, they will also be concerned to place feminism in a wider political framework, ensuring that women's citizen identity is protected as well as their feminist one. Ultimately, postmodernism is so important in a new wave because it finally breaks with the separatist position in feminism and places women in the centre of society and politics.

For the feminists of this study, Benhabib, Young and Mouffe, postmodern theory provides new tools and concepts to assess feminism. Each has seen postmodernism as a critical strategy that allows feminists to come to terms with the fragmentation of the second wave and which raises new questions of democratic inclusion. The problem with each of their theories of democracy is that they have all failed to come to terms with the need for, and the nature of, the concept of representation in any new wave of feminism. Instead, they favour the presence and participation of women in transformative political models and do not fully address the importance of representative mechanisms. To avoid these problems, it will be contended that representative structures must be in place in any future feminist

movement and that feminists need to seek wider involvement in representative democracy as citizens before the presence and participation of women can be secured.

Hence, this chapter will set out a defence and re-theorising - in terms of new wave feminism - of representative democracy. It will consider the history of representative democracy, its theoretical basis and the existing practices of representative democracy to delineate what is distinctive and useful about it for feminists in a new wave. With this defence, feminists can embrace the distinctive features of modern representation and representative democracy to restate a politics of citizenship that is responsive to their demands after fragmentation. The concept of representative democracy on this reading is particularly important for feminists who have accepted the postmodern challenge and thus want to maintain a commitment to anti-essentialism, contingency and anti-utopianism in their feminist politics.

The chapter is split into two sections to explore representative democracy for feminism in a new wave. The first half introduces the concept of representation and the model of representative democracy. It looks first at the problems with other feminist models of democracy, briefly reiterating these to illustrate why a concept of representative democracy is useful. Secondly, the history of the concepts of representation and representative democracy is considered, from their roots in revolutionary practice, through Whig and Burkean visions of representative democracy, to the studies of Hanna Pitkin, Anthony Birch and Bernard Manin.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, the chapter details the distinctive features of representation and representative democracy that are useful for feminists in a new wave. These features are the 'paradox' of representation as the simultaneous presence and non-presence of the represented,<sup>2</sup> the representative democratic emphasis on elections and procedural equality, and the historical contingency of representative models of democracy on

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<sup>1</sup> H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1967), A. Birch, *Representation*, (London: Pall Mall, 1971), A. Birch, *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), and B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, op.cit., see pp. 8-9, is the first to recognise and theorise the paradox of representation.



conditions of social diversity and 'moral indeterminacy'.<sup>3</sup>

The second half of the chapter concerns the relationship between feminism and representative democracy. It begins with a consideration of feminist responses to representative democracy and suggests that in the second wave these attitudes were largely hostile to representation, with many second wave feminists favouring participatory models of democracy. However, the feminist attempt to establish party quotas in the 1980s and 1990s and the gradual institutionalisation of feminist groups suggests a more open attitude to representative democracy is developing. With this new attitude in mind, the implications of representative democracy for future feminist politics will be detailed. This involves a twofold analysis that looks at both the impact of representation on a future alliance based feminist movement and also at the sort of political strategies feminists might deploy in finding their place in representative models of democracy. It is clear from this distinction that feminism can be reconciled with issues of representation in two areas: by theorising the importance of a concept of representation in a feminist alliance and by examining the place of feminists in representative democracy. It concludes by examining how feminist theory, in all its historical permutations, might modify existing representative practices and provide it with a rich theoretical dimension.

### **Why representative democracy?**

So far three models of democracy have been considered: Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy, Young's model of communicative democracy and Mouffe's model of agonal democracy. Each model was assessed in terms of its usefulness for democratically including women as both feminists and citizens. It was concluded that none of the models was fully adequate in providing these types of political inclusion. To start with Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy, it was seen to have a number of difficulties that made it problematic for feminists in a new wave. She begins

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<sup>3</sup> G. Kateb, 'The Moral Distinctiveness of Representative Democracy,' *Ethics*, Vol. 91, No. 3 (April 1981) p. 360.

by theorising feminists as a unified political group, whose sole political objective is to achieve democratic inclusion as autonomous citizens. She goes on to suggest that once feminists are present in a deliberative democratic structure, their aims, and those of women more generally, will be met in the deliberative formation of the common good. This transformative vision, it was argued, is both undesirable and unrealistic for feminists in a new wave. It continues to posit a unified feminist 'movement' as the only form of feminist political collectivity, missing the great diversity of feminist discourses after the second wave. Her political model also risks denying the political nature of feminist claims by requiring feminists to sacrifice the specificity of their demands to a democratic process committed to the common good. Moreover, she fails to adequately address the representative nature of her united feminist vision, and whether it can represent the interests of all women through its demand for autonomous citizenship in deliberative democracy.

Young also works from a basic model of deliberative democracy, but she modifies it further than Benhabib to take more account of social diversity. Thus, instead of positing a unified feminist group, she initially developed the idea of an 'affinity group'. In the 'affinity group' women were allowed to come together politically without reference to a shared and essential 'female' identity. The group was meant to avoid essentialism because its structure was cognisant of the differences between women, fluid and dynamic. She believed that if women could be represented in a more inclusive democratic model in terms of such an 'affinity group', they could make their specific political demands heard and still remain a heterogeneous collective. However, it was contended that her concept of communicative democracy, which was based on this idea of 'affinity group' representation, was only practicable once the 'affinity group' became a permanent, rigid and institutionalised forum for women. These alterations to the structure of the affinity group made it less dynamic and fluid than she had originally intended and her political settlement began to essentialise women's identities, arguing that women in the affinity group could unanimously decide on how to use a political veto in their name. There was a further problem in



that while she had made moves to theorise *group* representative mechanisms at the communicative democratic level, she was less clear on how these would operate to make the affinity group internally representative. Ultimately, Young's communicative model was seen to give women a political identity as women and feminists, but to lose sight of how women could find democratic inclusion beyond the confines of their gender difference and marginality. Her recent model of serial collectivity has gone some way in making up for these deficiencies. In this work she suggests that any future feminist group will be short-term, possibly issue-based and narrowly representative, women will thus need other political spaces to make their voices heard. However, she has not as yet altered her concept of democracy to respond to these changes.

Chantal Mouffe, in contrast to both Benhabib and Young, was seen to be more successful in understanding the difficulties in securing a fully inclusive political model. She also had a deeper concern that essentialism should not creep back into a feminist collective in the light of the fragmentation of second wave movement. Her response therefore was to consider how feminists could form non-essentialising political groups by joining with other marginalised group and positioning their demands as part of a wider fight against subordination and in favour of further democratisation. She termed this collective, 'radical democratic citizenship'. She argued that it would be structured as an alliance, allowing the groups to come together for political action, while maintaining some of their political differences. It was seen that she has also begun to theorise a model of agonal democracy that can take account of the difficulties in forming political collectives in diverse societies, where citizens may have a number of social and political allegiances. Despite these promising moves, it was argued that Mouffe continues to privilege a citizen identity based on the radical democratic collective. She believes that membership in such a collective will radically transform the pre-existing identities of those in it. Consequently, she, like Benhabib, risks subsuming the specificity of feminist political claims to wider democratic demands. Moreover, this vision of radical citizenship, by assuming a set of common

concerns, does not marry well with her view of an agonal democratic politics governed by incommensurable conflict and partial decision-making.

Therefore, three broad problems emerge in Benhabib, Young and Mouffe's models of democracy that suggest that the concepts of representation and representative democracy could be very useful. Firstly, they assume either explicitly or implicitly that women as feminists can be successfully unified as an active, participatory political collective. It is very possible, however, that feminism will not be able to rebuild itself as a united political collective and that the concept of representation will thus be necessary to avoid problems with accountability in a fragmented movement. Moreover, many women do not have time for the pure presence these models prescribe and thus, some degree of representation would be necessary to legitimate these democratic models. Secondly, they believe that democratic models, if properly inclusive of social difference, can be transformative: changing conflicts of opinion and value-pluralism into collective common concerns. However, by holding onto utopian dreams of a transformative politics, they do not seriously examine existing models of representative democracy that could be useful in a feminist strategy for democratic inclusion. Moreover, the emphasis of Young and Benhabib on transformative models of democracy does not take account of the distinct nature of the political that was examined in Chapter Five. In expecting transformation they thus forgo the political, believing that social relations can be harmonised and consensual decisions made. A generic model of representative democracy, it will be argued next, is more responsive to the political as a relationship of 'otherness' and potential conflict than these discourse and deliberative models of democracy. Thirdly, Benhabib and Mouffe assume that women as feminists will be prepared to risk their specificity for inclusion in a reworked model of democracy. In other words, they assume that women will privilege their citizen identity over their feminist one. This assumption does not account for women's diversity and their plurality of political demands, allegiances and identities.

The model of representative democracy, it will be argued, fits the demands of



feminism in a new wave, allowing women to be politically included as both feminists and as citizens without subsuming the one under the other. In meeting these demands, it draws on the postmodern critical strategy that has been crucial in realigning feminist theory in the new wave. Hence, it respects anti-essential identities, anti-utopianism and the contingency of political thought on existing political traditions and practices. Moreover, it meets with the concept of the political identified in Chapter Five, recognising the public nature of the political, the need for artificial political identities to be created, the presence of incommensurable conflict and the need for contingent decision-making. The model of representative democracy argued for here will be both a defence and re-theorising of existing models. Central to this project is the belief that feminists have much to gain by making strategic use of existing democratic practices. They must find women's place in democracy now and not in a utopian vision of consensual politics.

### **A short history of representation and representative democracy**

The history of representative democracy is important because this is a defence of an *existing* political model. It is therefore necessary to understand the different manifestations of representative democracy as both a theoretical concept and an evolving practice. What the history shows is a dynamic, complex and diverse model. It developed from formal, and frankly absolutist origins, through the Enlightenment, into a model that is open to many interpretations and institutional forms. There are three broad areas in the study of the history of representative democracy that need to be examined: the concept of representation, the meeting of representation and democracy, and the role of the democratic representative.

#### ***Formal representation***

The idea of political representation began to develop before the rise of mass suffrage and democratic citizenship. It has its roots in the medieval era. In England the person of the King initially became more 'representative' to gain the consent of the barony

for his tax demands. Hence, the *Magna Carta* was signed to allow knights to be elected who could then agree on the King's tax proposals. These knights eventually became a parliamentary assembly whose members not only negotiated with the King, but also ensured their constituents' demands were heard and that their constituents in turn were kept informed of the King's actions.<sup>4</sup> When the concept of representation is considered in its historic isolation from democracy, its formal features become apparent.

Put simply, formal political representation is the authorisation of the representative to act on behalf of the represented. It is fulfilled in its formal sense if the government or representative is responsive and accountable to those it represents. The representative in being responsive is consequently legitimated and thus continues to be authorised to act on behalf of the represented.<sup>5</sup> In the most formal definition of representation there are some variables. How the representative 'acts on behalf' of the representative is one such variable - are they to act independently or in terms of a mandate - and this will be determined by the different historical and theoretical conditions of the concept. Another variable is how the success of the representative relationship should be measured. Again, different criteria emerge at different historical moments.

Indeed, without a democratic basis, the concept of representation is necessarily minimal. As J. Roland Pennock recognises, hereditary monarchs and dictators such as Hitler can be considered to be *formally* representative. He writes of Hitler:

Even Hitler, sought legitimacy by claiming to represent the people...because through him the true spirit of the German people found expression. He also sought to authenticate his legitimacy by claiming the constitutional legality of his regime and by subsequent reliance on plebiscites.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, many types of political regime may wish to present themselves as 'representative'. So while the idea of representation as a purely formal procedure can

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<sup>4</sup> A. Birch, *Representation*, op.cit., pp. 26-28.

<sup>5</sup> A. Birch in *The Concepts and Theories of Modern Democracy*, op.cit., pp. 76-78, sets out the functions of political representation, including authorisation, legitimation and responsiveness.



point to important ideas such as legitimacy, accountability and responsiveness, it is given extra depth when it is contingently theorised in terms of democratic equality. It is this ingredient that modernised the concept of representation and made it a substantive as well as a formal relationship.

### *Representation and democracy*

Historically representation and democracy meet in the English political debates of the seventeenth century<sup>7</sup> and in the American and French Revolutions.<sup>8</sup> In the English debates, according to Anthony Birch, there were three conceptions of representative democracy: the Whig, the Tory and the radical. Whigs believed that representative democracy should be a process of formally authorising the representative, in this case a Member of Parliament (MP), to find the national interest.<sup>9</sup> The Whig concept of representative democracy thus remained a minimal one in which the representative seeks authorisation and not guidance from the electorate. However, the Whig position was opposed by the Tory belief that the representative should represent the collective interests of the local electorate as opposed to the national one.<sup>10</sup> The Whig position was also opposed by the radical belief that each man should be able to establish the representative relationship through universal suffrage.<sup>11</sup>

The radical position was, unsurprisingly, important in the development of representative democracy because it believed that the represented should have the ultimate authority over the representatives, an idea that is crucial in any theory of *democratic* representation. Thus, radical groups such as the Levellers wanted universal suffrage and regular elections<sup>12</sup> and English followers of Tom Paine suggested that

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<sup>6</sup> J. Roland Pennock, 'Political Representation: An Overview,' in J. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (eds.), *Representation: Nomos X*, (New York: Atherton Press, 1968), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> A. Birch, *Representation*, op.cit., p. 36, notes that these debates emerged from calls to extend the suffrage which then focussed on the role of the parliamentarian as a representative.

<sup>8</sup> B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, op.cit., p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> A. Birch, *Representation*, op.cit., p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37.

citizens should be able to rebel against unpopular governments.<sup>13</sup> Yet another radical thinker, Jeremy Bentham, argued that Parliament should be a microcosm of society so that every social group and position was reflected in its constitution.<sup>14</sup> These radical positions increased accountability of the representative relationship. But in doing so, they made the relationship between the representative and the represented more separate.<sup>15</sup> The representative could no longer assume that he naturally embodied the desires of the representatives, or that he would know what was best for them - the type of representative relationship the Whig's assumed. Rather, the radical position wanted the represented to guide the representative via a democratic electoral system.

Hence, once representation is linked to democracy the representative continues to be responsive and to seek authorisation. But he is no longer seen as the unquestioned and ultimate authority, exemplified in the work of Hobbes, who, once given authorisation, stands in for and makes decisions *as* the represented.<sup>16</sup> Consequently a separation occurs between the representative and the represented, with the latter expected to have some control over the former. In turn, modern concepts of representation alter the classic conception of democratic equality because of this distinction between the representative and the represented. What is now important in the representative democratic working of political equality is the equal right of all to *elect* a representative. Manin argues that this sort of equality is very different to the sort of political equality found in ancient democracies - such as in Athens - which were based on the equal right to *stand* for election.<sup>17</sup> Again, the emphasis is shifted from the representative to the represented and, as Manin notes:

In a system based on lot...the persons that happen to be selected are

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> This idea that the relationship between the represented and the representative became more separate is of course quite ironic, because most radical thinkers who demanded universal suffrage would have wanted to bring the representative closer to the people.

<sup>16</sup> Although this is a widely recognised element of Hobbes's work, Hanna Pitkin gives a very detailed account of it in, *The Concept of Representation*, op.cit., pp. 14-37.

<sup>17</sup> B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, op.cit., pp. 8-35, argues that it is precisely the desire to secure the equality of choice (of representatives), as opposed to the equality of standing for political office, that means representative democracy relies on the election and not the lot to select its representatives.



not put in power through the will of those over whom they will exercise their authority; they are not put in power by anyone. Under an elective system, by contrast, the consent of the people is constantly reiterated.<sup>18</sup>

The electoral process thus becomes central to establishing the representative relationship in representative democracy, ensuring that the people, the democratic public, authorise the representative. Consequently, modern representative democracy rests on new concepts of representation and new interpretations of democracy that break with the absolutist heritage of representation, and can be understood in terms of a separation between the represented and the representative.<sup>19</sup> The representative no longer *is* the represented as he was under an absolutist system.

### *Democracy in the twentieth century: the changing role of the representative*

As representative democracy developed, important questions emerged about the nature of representatives and their relationship to the represented. Initially, the representative was seen to represent either sectional, economic interests or, in the Burkean case, the national interest. In these representative relationships good representation hinged on whether the representative properly protected the local interests they stood for - the idea of the representative as a constituency MP - or whether, in the case of Burke's concept, they acted with the independence of mind to decide on the common interests of all. These issues were played out in pre-twentieth century 'mandate-independence' debates,<sup>20</sup> which asked if representatives were to be mandated, contractually obliged to represent the exact wishes of the electorate, or whether the representative should be an independent actor seeking out the common good or national interest.<sup>21</sup> These same questions have been asked in twentieth century accounts of political representation and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> B. Manin, *ibid.*, p. 28, again notes that the lot does not produce this type of distinction. With the lot, the selected person governs because they are also the governed, Thus, there is a direct relationship of identification between the governed and the governor, that is broken with the electoral system, whereby the citizens vote for someone distinguished from them.

<sup>20</sup> H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, *op.cit.*, pp. 144 -167.

<sup>21</sup> Both radical thinkers such as Bentham and conservative thinkers such as Burke believed that representatives should be free to find, respectively, the common good or the national interest without fear of factionalism or sectionalism. J. Lively and A. Lively (eds.), *Democracy in Britain: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 83.

representative democracy, but the increasing complexity of the national interest and the growing diversity of local communities have seen the issues become less defined. Moreover, a new concern with the social identity of the representative has developed that to some extent eclipses the mandate/independence debate.

The new concern with social identity changed the nature of debates on representation in the twentieth century. Prior debates had tended to argue that the representative should be someone fit for political leadership, either by birth or education.<sup>22</sup> Even John Stuart Mill, who saw educative benefits in representative democracy, wanted the most educated members of society to be given extra votes to ensure that only representatives of the highest calibre were elected.<sup>23</sup> Beyond this basic social characteristic that all representative shared, there was no other debate about identity. Indeed, the role of the representative was to represent the *interests*, either local and economic or national, of the represented. He did not have to share their social position.

It was only in the twentieth century that the need to match the social identity of the representative to the social identity of the represented was seen as an important factor in democratic representation.<sup>24</sup> Manin attributes this to the rise of party representative democracy in which socialist parties characterised the vote as ‘not a matter of choice but of social identity and destiny’.<sup>25</sup> The emergence of the Labour Party, which wanted to secure better representation of the working class in Parliament, certainly emphasised this identification between the representative and the represented. As Anuerin Bevan, a Labour Party MP in the early twentieth century, stated, ‘a

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<sup>22</sup> This was ensured and protected by a property qualification for representatives, that was in place, in England, until 1858, *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup> J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*, (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Son Ltd, 1910), pp. 256-260, was also concerned that once the working classes were enfranchised, Parliament would become dominated by their representatives and highly unrepresentative of the middle and upper classes.

<sup>24</sup> As I stated earlier, this concern begins to transcend the mandate/ independence argument. While a representative who fully reflects the social standing of those they represent and acts accordingly is certainly a mandated actor, the latter argument, voiced by Bevan, assumes that even in those areas where the representative must act, perhaps unexpectedly, with some independence, they will necessarily act as their represented do, given that they share the same social identity.



representative person is one who will act in a given situation in much the same way as those he represents would act in that same situation'. He added, 'in short, he must be of their kind'.<sup>26</sup> Many first wave feminists used these types of arguments to argue for women's enfranchisement. Millicent Fawcett, for example, argued that women representatives, because they were female, could bring specialist knowledge of moral issues to political life. These arguments continue to have force today in calls for Parliament to become a microcosm of society and in feminist attempts to establish party quotas for women MPs on the basis that only women can represent women's interests. In general these debates have seen the idea of representation shift from sectional or national interests and issues, to a personalised concern with identity.

These new questions about the nature of the representative have been attempts to mitigate and close the separation between the representative and the represented. However, as will be examined in detail in the next section, Manin has shown that the actual practice of representative democracy via the electoral system makes this gap impossible to close. According to Manin, the election always takes place to distinguish the representative from the represented, thus creating a separation between the two. Moreover, in seeking to close the gap between the representative and the represented, the whole idea of representative democracy is undermined. The representative no longer has to be accountable because it is assumed, as the Bevan quotation showed, that the representative will naturally know how to act as the represented would. Indeed, it will be argued that if a full identification of the representative with the represented could possibly occur in a representative democracy, then the relationship would not be representative at all; it would be a relationship of 'identification'. Hence, it will be shown in the next section that modern representative democracy has several features that constantly hinder the perfect identification of the represented with the representative. In fact, this sort of identification is not part of the distinctiveness of

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<sup>25</sup> B. Manin, 'The metamorphoses of representative government,' *Economy and Society*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (May 1994), p. 151.

<sup>26</sup> A. Bevan, 'Working Class MPs,' in J. Lively and A. Lively (eds.), *Democracy in Britain: A Reader*, op.cit., p. 97.

modern concepts of representation and representative democracy and actually risks returning it to its absolutist origins.

It is clear from this short history that as representative democracy has developed, as both a theory and a practice, it has become increasingly complex. Moreover, due to its dominant role in actual, existing democracy in the West, it is difficult to define representative democracy in a purely theoretical way without any reference to empirical observation. Given these two difficulties, the recent history of representative democracy cannot be approached in a definitive manner. At best the history of representative democracy has two general branches. One is the history of political representation as a means to establish the responsiveness, authority and legitimacy of any government. Since the concept of representation arose in the thirteenth century, few governments would claim to be unrepresentative in this formal way. The second branch to the history of representative democracy concerns its role as a democratic concept in which the *people* authorise the government (the representatives) in a substantive manner, making demands that must be explicitly met by government. To fulfil this role, the government must be accountable to those it represents, and attuned to both the nature of the represented and the representative. To this general picture must be added the institutional patterns of most representative democracies. These encompass a number of different levels of representation, from the local to the national, and allow for the representation of many different 'things', from organised interests to individual grievances. Pennock has summarised the complexity of representation, stating:

The existence of numerous and varied avenues of representation, each by virtue of its own peculiar nature, seeing, reflecting, attempting to effectuate a slightly different facet of that great conglomerate of desires and interests that make up the electorate, probably produces a more tolerable result than could be accomplished by any one of them alone.<sup>27</sup>

It would thus be neither sensible nor possible to give a rigid definition of representative democracy. It is not an ideal type but a dynamic practice. Consequently,

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<sup>27</sup> J. Pennock, 'Political Representation: An Overview,' op.cit., p. 27.



it would be easier to draw out the distinctive features of representative democracy and political representation as it operates in representative democracy than it would be to portray such an ideal. It can then be re-theorised as a useful interpretation of citizenship and democratic inclusion for feminists in a new wave.

### **Representative democracy and the political**

Representative democracy shares characteristics with other types of democracy and it may be interpreted in many ways, with many institutional practices, but it has three distinctive features.<sup>28</sup> One, its concept of representation is based on the presence and non-presence of the represented in the political process, two, its formal procedural basis is the election and third, following Kateb, it presupposes 'moral indeterminacy' and social diversity. It will be shown how these distinctive features meet with the concept of the political outlined at the end of Chapter Five. This concept is based on the 'public' nature of the political, a constructed, collective political identity, the presence of conflict in political decision-making, and the contingency of the political. By meeting this concept of the political, representative democracy is, in turn, a useful model for feminists in a new wave.

#### *The separation between the representative and the represented*

The first distinctive feature of representative democracy is its concept of political representation that is characterised by the separation between the represented and the representative. As it was shown earlier, this separation occurs as the concept of formal representation meets democracy and the represented, in this case the electorate, become more important than under absolutist regimes. Hanna Pitkin was one of the first thinkers to address this peculiar characteristic of representation, noting that it rested on a paradox: 'being represented means being present in some sense, while not really

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<sup>28</sup> These features are not the essence of representative democracy in the sense of being original and unchanging. They are contingent and dynamic, for example the type of election that might be held can be run in a number of different ways and produce a number of different types of representation. But without these features, a political model is not representative democracy.

being present literally or fully in fact'.<sup>29</sup> When this paradox is applied to political representation in representative democracy, it is clear that there is no necessary, fixed identification of the representative with the represented. Indeed, Manin indicates how the electoral system produces this separation between the representative and the represented, of which he writes, 'an elective system does not establish an identity between those who govern and those who are governed'.<sup>30</sup> According to Manin, the electoral system does not produce such identity because the process of electoral choice means the represented choose representatives who are distinct from them in some way. They might hold particular political skills or a party membership that the electorate and other candidates do not share.<sup>31</sup>

The separation between the represented and the representative is seen by many theorists to be the central weakness of representative democracy. Thinkers from Rousseau<sup>32</sup> to Carole Pateman have criticised representative mechanisms, insisting that they depend on the alienation of political right. In this process of alienation, the elector gives up her political right to a representative over whom she then finds she has no control.<sup>33</sup> It is necessary to reverse this tradition of thinking to suggest that in complex and diverse societies representation is not the alienation of political right, but a way of *establishing* it.

In this regard, political representation and its separation of the representative and the represented facilitates the construction of an artificial, collective political identity, that was seen to be a central characteristic of 'the political' in Chapter Five.

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<sup>29</sup> H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, op.cit., p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> B. Manin, 'The metamorphoses of representative government,' op.cit., p. 137.

<sup>31</sup> B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, op.cit., p. 140, argues that people may still want to elect people who are like themselves, but the situation in which they make their choice hinders this desire, 'the situation of choice constrains voters to elect candidates possessing uncommon (and positively valued) characteristics, regardless of their specific preferences'. At the root of this argument seems to be the suggestion that if we did not elect a representative because they were somehow distinct from us, and only voted for those like us, then we would have to ask the question, 'why am I not standing for office?' The only way to meet such a question would be to return to a system of lot to fill political office. The electoral system cannot answer this question because it produces the distinctiveness of the representatives. See B. Manin, *ibid.*, pp. 139-144, for a general discussion of how election produces distinction.

<sup>32</sup>J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, (London and Vermont: J. M. Dent and Charles E. Tuttle, 1993), p. 266.



As Ernesto Laclau argues, in times of social diversity, when peoples' identities are disunited because of social complexity, the representative can actually become a temporary, fixed reference point that provides a focus for collective demands and makes democracy possible. He writes:

In advanced industrial societies, the fragmentation of identities around issue politics requires forms of political aggregation whose constitution involves that political representatives play an active role in the formation of collective wills and not just be the passive mirror of the pre-constituted interests.<sup>34</sup>

In identifying this process, Laclau argues against the idea of perfect democratic representation in which the transparency of the representative process is achieved. For Laclau, therefore, social diversity emerges as a background condition to representative democracy and the representative emerges as a figure to find political unity in this diversity. There are clear roles for feminists here in temporarily aggregating women's political demands and in alliance building. They could become a focal point for finding and encouraging political collectivity.

The idea of the representative actively constructing political collectives also brings to fruition Pitkin's paradox of representation - that representation is to be present and yet not present - with the representative becoming the 'intermediary'. As such, he or she has a specific political role that makes them distinct from, but never separate to, the represented. This process allows the represented to be both present in the system, through their authorisation of the representative, and non-present at the same time. Their partial status as 'non-present' political actors allows them to seek out other political allegiances and identities. In short, the separation between the representative and the represented meets with the characteristics of 'the political' in allowing for a partial and artificial political identity to be established through the role of the representative. In turn this artificial identity can be conceived as non-essentialising because it never entirely determines the citizen identity, leaving each citizen free to pursue a number of political causes and allegiances without breaking the

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<sup>33</sup> C. Pateman, *The Disorder of Women*, (Oxford: Policy Press, 1989), p. 103.

representative relationship. Consequently, the representative process allows a political identity to be constructed in terms of one element of the citizen's identity, which otherwise remains decentred and multiple.

*The role of the election and procedural formality in representative democracy*

The representative relationship is established and maintained in representative democracy through the election procedure. It is via the election that the represented select and authorise the representative to act on their behalf in political decision making. The primary concern of the election therefore is not what is registered in the election, be this a sectional interest or a common interest, but to establish the act of representation. As Manin argues, 'election is a method for designating those who should rule and for legitimising power'.<sup>35</sup> This is very different to the role of the election in direct democracy, which is primarily concerned to register the views of the electorate.

In authorising the representative via the election, the sense of distance between the representative and the represented emerges again. The electoral process compounds this separation because, as Manin's work shows, it produces representatives who are distinguished in some way from those they represent: 'election cannot, by its very nature, result in the selection of candidates who resemble their constituents'.<sup>36</sup> He goes on to argue that election necessarily produces a representative who is distinct because it involves making a *choice*. According to this argument, in making a choice between candidates, the elector must choose in terms of a characteristic she considers one candidate to have above all the others and one that she considers to be a superior characteristic. This characteristic, according to Manin, has traditionally been wealth or social status or education, but it can be *any* positively

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<sup>34</sup> E. Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', in C. Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> B. Manin, 'The metamorphoses of representative democracy,' *op.cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>36</sup> B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, *op.cit.*, p. 149.



judged trait.<sup>37</sup>

The election also produces a separation between the represented and the representatives because, according to George Kateb, the electorate in a representative democracy is aware of the artificial nature of authority that needs to be revalidated at every election and thus they are less respectful of it. They do not see the electoral process as a permanent expression of their identities or their interests. As Kateb states, 'political authority is, at every moment, a temporary and conditional grant, regularly revocable'.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the electorate accept the temporary nature of the authority they have established and acknowledge that it is revisable.

The electoral process, because it produces this minimal and formal political relationship, is also useful in coming to terms with the public and conflictual nature of the political as a relationship between others, between citizens who may not be sympathetic to each other's demands. By voting in elections, all citizens can participate in the system as citizens, even when they are in radical disagreement. This more minimal sense of participation can also be very protective, allowing conflicts to emerge and be expressed without the citizens having to subsume their whole identity in the political relationship. Mark Warren also recognises the value of minimal institutional and procedural frameworks in the face of political conflict, stating:

They [radical democrats] should ask whether...people will jump at the chance to become active participants. If they don't, it may not be just because our culture induces apathy...but also because of the unattractive features of politics as such. Radical democrats must therefore think about how institutional designs could lessen and contain the risks of politics while still offering the means to articulate and negotiate its discomforts.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the electoral system is a vital part of this institutional framework, allowing for minimal and widespread participation in a potentially conflictual process.

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<sup>37</sup> B. Manin, *ibid.*, p. 160, makes it clear that these traits are contingent and thus change from one context to another. Moreover, they don't actually have to be superior, they must just be perceived as such.

<sup>38</sup> G. Kateb, 'The Moral Distinctiveness of Representative Democracy,' *op.cit.*, p. 358.

<sup>39</sup> M. Warren, 'What Should We Expect From More Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics,' *Political Theory*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (May 1996), p. 266.

### *Social diversity and 'moral indeterminacy' in representative democracy*

The open nature of the electoral decision-making process leads into the third distinctive feature of representative democracy, what George Kateb refers to as its 'moral indeterminacy'. Representative democracy encourages moral indeterminacy according to Kateb because of the partial nature of representative political authority, which means that the represented are less afraid of it. Consequently, a condition of moral indeterminacy emerges, entailing 'the belief that within a frame of settled commitments, a number of contrasting and competing responses or answers to morally tinged questions are to be expected and welcomed'.<sup>40</sup> It is not relativist because representative democracy still allows a temporary and authorised decision to be made through the electoral process. This decision is temporary because the authority of the decision is partial and potentially open to contest. Hence, he concludes that representative democracy because of its partiality, 'cultivates a general tolerance of, and even affection for diversity: diversity in itself, and diversity as the source of regulated contest and competition'.<sup>41</sup>

Manin also theorises how representative democracy procedures produce contesting public opinions. For Manin, the representative in democracy ceases to embody the whole people because of the electoral separation between them and the representatives: 'representative government is a system in which the representatives can never say "We the people" with absolute confidence and certainty'.<sup>42</sup> According to Manin, without a substantive act of identification to ground representation, there remain areas of opinion outside the remit of the representative where differences can flourish.<sup>43</sup> He argues moreover that this diversity of public opinions in representative democracies encourages the formal accountability of the representative, such that he or she must think through their actions in terms of the range of possible public opinions if they want to be re-elected. This process leads to representatives identifying,

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<sup>40</sup> G. Kateb, 'The Moral Distinctiveness of Representative Democracy,' op.cit., pp. 360-361.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>42</sup> B. Manin, 'The metamorphoses of representative democracy,' op.cit., p. 143.

<sup>43</sup> B. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, op.cit., p. 174.



crystallising and reshaping political demands and preferences, adding to pre-existing interests and ideas through the political process.<sup>44</sup>

The social diversity of representative democracy, as was shown, also constitutes and is constituted by the partiality of representative decision-making. Decision-making in representative democracy is inescapably partial because of both the separation between the representative and the represented, and the electoral process. Hence, it is because the representative never fully embodies the represented that any decisions made at elections can only be partial and temporary. As Laclau writes of this process, 'the particularity of the decision assumes the function of an imaginary closure - while not being entirely able to perform an actual and final closure'.<sup>45</sup> The electoral process, therefore, makes it clear to citizens that any decision holds until the next election, when new representatives could be elected on a different platform.<sup>46</sup> Hence, representative democracy produces social diversity because of the separation between the representative and the represented, but this very diversity, coupled with the formal procedures of the election, allows temporary, partial and authoritative decisions to be made.

This idea that an authoritative decision can be made, even in the face of great diversity, gives representative democracy a definite advantage over the models of deliberative democracy examined in Chapters Three and Four. In Benhabib and Young's discourse models, decision-making still revolves around consensus. It was argued that such consensus could only be achieved in a substantive manner at the cost of social diversity. Indeed, it was seen that Young and Benhabib, as well as Mouffe, ultimately privileged transformative democratic settlements in which social differences were erased in the quest for political consensus. Representative democracy on the other hand, allows for partial, temporary and authoritative decisions to be made even

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<sup>44</sup> B. Manin, 'The metamorphoses of representative democracy,' *op.cit.*, states that, 'in politics demand is not exogenous; in general, preferences do not exist prior to the action of politicians,' p. 161.

<sup>45</sup> E. Laclau, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism, Hegemony', *op.cit.*, p. 59.

when there is substantial political dissent and social diversity.

To summarise, the representative model of democracy that has been theorised here meets with the concept of the political outlined in Chapter Five. It is public, taking as its condition the diversity and lack of unity between citizens. As Fred Dallmayr has recognised, democracy is always about the recognition of separation and strangeness - that was seen to be constitutive of the political public - and its temporary overcoming via the process of representation.<sup>47</sup> Hence, representative democratic procedures do not assume a relationship between sympathetic equals and they maintain the separation between the representative and the represented, because the act of political representation is only temporary. The representative, as Laclau's work showed, thus assumes an important role in constructing an artificial, political collective identity and shaping the issues or identities that will form the basis of the election. The electoral process in turn allows the representative to be authorised to make temporary and partial decisions. These decisions can be contested and revised at the next election because they are partial and inherently revocable, depending as they do on electoral outcomes. Consequently, the election procedure sets up the relationship of conflict and decision that was also shown to be a feature of the political.

### **Feminist responses to representative democracy**

Feminist responses to representative democracy have been mixed. Many feminists in the second wave objected to representative democracy and representative processes in liberal democracy for two reasons. Their first concern was that representative democratic models were inherently male oriented. Many feminists, for example Susan Moller Okin, argued that the exclusion of women was woven into the theoretical basis

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<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that representative democracy necessitates regular elections or else it is neither representative, the ruler would be a permanent and absolutist expression of the people, nor democratic, because without the regular election the people would have no autonomy in the process.

<sup>47</sup> F. Dallmayr, 'Postmetaphysics and Democracy', *Political Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (February 1993), pp. 116-123, notes that the people are an 'absent presence' in postmetaphysical democracy. Following Charles Lefort, he says that they are neither a 'compact body' nor a 'nullity' - the latter being governed by complete hostility and the former by complete transparency and solidarity. Instead it is an amalgam of both that is typified by Heidegger's concept of "overcoming".



of these types of democracy. According to her argument, representative models presumed women would be in the private sphere looking after the children, while men, the 'representatives,' decided the political issues of the day.<sup>48</sup> This concern was compounded by the general radical view, forcefully asserted by Pateman, that political representation is the alienation of one's political rights and thus it can only extend and worsen the political exclusion of women. As Pateman writes, 'citizens can only look at such a [representative] political sphere and not act in it'.<sup>49</sup> Gynocentric feminists, more generally, objected to the competitive, conflictual and hierarchical nature of representative democracy embodied in the need to win elections, all of which they felt was antithetical to women's natures. Such criticisms have had a powerful legacy. Ruth Lister, for example, concludes her recent study of feminist citizenship by remarking that when she began her work she was unsure whether citizenship could encompass women at all, believing that citizenship might be inherently 'woman-unfriendly'.<sup>50</sup>

The second set of objections concerns the minimal nature of representative mechanisms. For many feminists in the second wave, political participation was crucial to get women together, to get their voices heard, and ultimately, to aid them in their identity formation. And, as has been well documented, most second wave feminists thus embraced participatory models of democracy. This type of thinking has also had long legacy in the feminist movement. Iris Young, for example, continues to assert the importance of political participation for 'consciousness raising' and solidarity.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, for many second wave feminists the representative model that allowed participation to begin and end with the vote, if the woman so pleased, meant that women could remain politically isolated. On these terms women were left as no more than drudges to their private identities.

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<sup>48</sup> Susan Moller Okin's, *Women in Western Political Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1979) 1992), is the classic examination of how women were systematically excluded from political thought and practice. She goes on to note that until we question this inherent exclusion, women will never be fully included in the political dimension, p. 286.

<sup>49</sup> C. Pateman, *The Disorder of Women*, op.cit., p. 104.

<sup>50</sup> R. Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 195.

<sup>51</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 153.

However, while participatory political structures did mobilise women in the second wave, they brought their own problems. These are outlined in Chapter One and can be reiterated briefly. Consciousness raising was meant to bring women together and to find out what they had in common. In the early days of the movement this need to create solidarity kept some potentially divisive subjects such as lesbianism off the agenda. Consequently, any woman who found she was different either conformed to the consensus of a group or left. Some of the latter set up their own groups and others withdrew feeling politically disillusioned. The fact that the legitimacy of the group rested on the participation and commitment of its members meant that they tended to be very unrepresentative of women, with young, childless and educated women predominating, as they had the most time on their hands for the protracted political process. This would not have been such a problem if they had been elected the movement leaders and had the authority to speak for other women, but as this was rarely the case, there were accountability and legitimacy problems: the black feminist critique was one of the clearest indications that the movement was not representative. Moreover, without clear leaders, these groups tended to fragment and withdraw from politics as internal debates became unwieldy. This political withdrawal was compounded by the general feminist distrust of conventional and state politics that had inspired the participatory model in the first place. As Ursula Vogel has noted, these sorts of feminist conceptions of citizenship 'tend to emphasise grass-roots participation at the expense of involvement at the institutional centre of the state'.<sup>52</sup>

What these problems of second wave feminism suggest is that feminists must look beyond participatory models of democracy and consider how representative mechanism and representative democracy can help re-politicise feminism after the fragmentation of the second wave. While feminists are right to have concerns about the alienating potential of representative democracy - and these concerns will be addressed at the end of the chapter - they must first consider the benefit of the model

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<sup>52</sup> U. Vogel, 'Is Citizenship Gender-Specific?' in U. Vogel and M. Moran, (eds.), *The Frontiers of Citizenship*, (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 82.



for feminists in a new wave. A new wave in which their utopian dreams of sisterhood and separatism, that fuelled their preferences for participation, have been replaced with fragmentation and diversity. Indeed, even in the second wave, the American liberal feminist organisation, NOW, gave some force to the importance of representative structures. They held regular elections to elect a leadership slate and on this basis maintained one of the largest feminist group memberships over a long period of time. While they remained too minimal and corporate for some, their longevity was an achievement in the context of the second wave and NOW even witnessed the election of a radical platform.<sup>53</sup>

There is also a sense in which many feminists are ready to come to terms with and re-theorise representative models of democracy. As Anne Phillips recognises, it has taken the re-emergence and maturation of the feminist concern with citizenship for feminists to seriously consider 'macro-level' democracy, which includes liberal democracy and issues of representation.<sup>54</sup> Some feminists have now begun to ask whether representative, liberal democracy is inherently opposed to women or whether their exclusion has been historically contingent and is thus revisable.<sup>55</sup> A study of British feminism by Vicky Randall and Joni Lovenduski has traced the increasing involvement of feminists and feminist issues in the political system since the late 1980s.<sup>56</sup> While such institutionalisation can bring its own problems, it at least suggests that the representative system can begin to incorporate feminist issues. Moreover, the end of the separatist dream, that pervaded the second wave radical sector, has led to more pragmatic forms of feminism. In the 1980s, the recognition that the feminist movement was fragmented meant that some feminists, such as Anne Phillips, argued that it was now necessary to live with representative democracy and to

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<sup>53</sup> In 1982 they had a membership of 250,000, B. Ryan, *Feminism and the Women's Movement: Dynamics of Change in Social Movement Ideology and Activism*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 73.

<sup>54</sup> A. Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 104.

<sup>55</sup> See Valerie Bryson's Chapter on 'Politics and the State' in *Feminist Debates: Issues of Theory and Political Practice*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 90-122.

<sup>56</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminists Politics: Women and Power in Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 135.

make it work for women. Hence, Phillips has looked extensively at the possibility of establishing party quotas for the selection of women parliamentary candidates.<sup>57</sup> This idea was further reflected in feminist practice with the establishment of Emily's List, an organisation that supports women's attempts to get into Parliament.<sup>58</sup>

What seems to have happened is that many feminists now feel a certain degree of ambivalence towards questions of representation and representative democracy. The experiences and legacies of the second wave make them cautious and sometimes hostile to these concepts, yet the issues of the new wave and its concern with citizenship make some degree of representation necessary and inevitable. As was shown, Benhabib, Young and Mouffe's political models typify this ambivalence. Benhabib until recently failed to seriously engage with representative democracy, holding out for a utopian model based on presence, participation and transformation. Mouffe at least seems to accept the need for representation and representative models, but she does not submit them to an explicit examination. And, whereas Young has looked at representation, her position will be examined later, she continues to base it on the permanent representation of social groups which risks essentialising women.

It is now necessary to push feminism closer to representative democracy and let feminism embrace its distinctive political elements as the basis on which a feminist politics might be rejuvenated. It will be seen that a model of representative democracy will neither erase the differences between women nor ground a sisterhood, but it could provide a framework in which the differences become manageable. A greater concern with representative democracy, moreover, would enable feminists to politically re-engage, allowing women to participate in politics as both political feminists and as citizens. It is clear then that feminism engages with the concepts of representation and representative democracy in two ways: the concept of representation must operate in a feminist movement as a coalition and conversely, feminists must operate in existing

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<sup>57</sup> Anne Phillips has written frequently on the subject of quotas, but *Engendering Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 60-91, deals in most detail with the specific question of quotas for women and their place in issues of representation.

<sup>58</sup>Emily's List is an organisation formed to support and advise prospective female MPs.



models of representative democracy. Each of these areas will be considered separately to outline the different issues and questions they entail for feminists in a new wave. Once the framework of representative democracy is accepted, it might be easier to address its problems of apathy and minimalism, and to supplement it with other democratic measures drawn from deliberative and agonal models.

### **The concept of representation in the feminist alliance**

During the second wave, two connected factors emerged that served to make the feminist movement appear 'unrepresentative': ideological factors and formal, organisational factors. In the first instance, the emergence of the black women's critique exposed how unrepresentative the ideology of sisterhood was. Until this point, the logic of sisterhood operated on an extreme and essentialising metaphysic of presence. In this logic to be a member of the sisterhood was to be all women, experiencing the same, universal patriarchal oppression. In this process, representation is replaced with the equal, personal identification of all members of the group with each other.

Most feminist groups therefore did not have leaders or formal voting procedures. They eschewed formal voting in favour of consensus decision-making to further reflect the ideal of sisterhood: namely, that each woman spoke for all women and all women could be any woman. The problems of sisterhood and the organisation of the second wave are now widely discussed, but there is still a lack of concrete thinking on how to make a future feminist movement, both ideologically and organisationally, more representative. It is also apparent that making the movement more representative by structuring it as an alliance is not the best way to achieve substantial, widespread representative procedures, because an alliance structure may be too loose and diffuse to enshrine these procedures. Consequently, it is necessary to separately address both the ideological and structural factors of representation. In the course of this analysis there will be some speculation about the course of feminist politics in a new wave, in accordance with the arguments of Chapter Two, which

suggested that it will be alliance-based, non-essentialising, non-utopian and concerned with women as both citizens and feminists.

*The ideological basis of representation in a new wave of feminism*

Few feminists today foresee a return to sisterhood and many feminists now advocate an alliance or coalition structure for the movement.<sup>59</sup> While most of these feminists advocate an alliance structure to avoid essentialising women, it is also an important strategy to bring the idea of representation into feminist political practice and thinking. Conceiving of the movement as an alliance acknowledges that the movement is not representative of all women. It is only representative of those women involved and even then it must continually negotiate its claims to representation ensuring that it is not ignoring groups of women, or so that it can justify any kind of exclusion.<sup>60</sup>

Hence, the representative relationship now seems necessary and realistic for feminists both at movement level and citizenship level. Women do not have anything naturally or essentially in common and hence any common political relationship between them will be a constructed one. As such, it will be open to contest and dissent. In these conditions, it is imperative that feminists accept that they are representatives for interested women and that they do not take their own experiences and opinions to stand for the experiences and opinions of all women. Feminists can thus recognise the diversity of women's experiences but seek to represent a feminist political viewpoint, which reflects but does not encapsulate a set of women-specific political issues. The formal election of representative leadership and policy is, as Laclau's work made clear, one way to temporarily aggregate feminist views into a political position when no natural consensus can be reached. What is more, this is an imperfect but stark choice for feminists. Either feminists accept unity around representation - knowing that this process of representation can never be complete or perfect - or they will find themselves in a position where there is no way of speaking, as feminists, for women at

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Chapter Two, p. 83-84.



all.

*The organisational basis of representation in a new wave of feminism*

The problem with structuring the feminist movement as an alliance is that it makes organisational and procedural representation very difficult to implement. An alliance is a diffuse and loose network of groups and in changing political circumstances it will have varying degrees of unity and solidity. It is possible, therefore, that at times the alliance will face internal conflict between groups which have remained distinctive elements within its structure.<sup>61</sup> Given its precariousness, *alliance-wide*, formal procedures for representation such as the election of a leadership platform may be impracticable. Iris Young's idea of women's affinity group representation exemplifies the problems in trying to tie the bonds of alliance too tightly for the purpose of political representation. In her work on communicative democracy, women are seen as a specific affinity group to be represented in all government decisions, in some cases they will even have the final authority over government policy. If her example is fleshed out in terms of procedural representation, it is clear that there would need to be some form of electoral and voting mechanisms within the affinity group of women. A vote would need to be taken among all women to decide their political position and to elect a leadership that, on Young's reckoning, would have to have separate sections to reflect different sub-groups of women.<sup>62</sup> With these procedures in place, it is conceivable that the leadership could make representative decisions and, at least, hold referenda on areas such as reproductive policy where women will have the power of veto. However, the sheer scale of this exercise makes it difficult to imagine. Moreover, for it to be workable, it still presumes that women hold a common position so that they could come to some unanimous agreement to use a veto.

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<sup>60</sup> Here I am thinking of women who are members of explicitly anti-feminist groups. A feminist alliance would have to make it explicit that they were to be excluded in terms of representation.

<sup>61</sup> If there was a relatively stable feminist alliance, then it might be possible to think about permanent and formal procedures of representation.

<sup>62</sup> I. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, op.cit., p. 162, notes how it is necessary to ensure the movement has forums for any group of women who feel they are distinctive.

A more likely scenario for the representation of women, than a permanent rainbow coalition with a separate section for women, is that local and national governments decide on an *ad hoc* basis to consult feminists. This consultation will occur either because the tiers of government want to create 'women-friendly' policy or because feminists have brought an issue to government attention by protest and pressure. Thus, it is possible to envision two different workings of procedural representation in the feminist alliance to meet this scenario, and these are dependent on the varying political circumstances the alliance might find itself in. The first is a set of *ad hoc* procedures of representation for the alliance to get together for a period of consultation with either local or national governments and the second is a more permanent, alliance-wide drive for representation, starting with the representativeness of each feminist group.

*Ad hoc* procedures are useful if a feminist alliance wants to establish its representativeness ready for a local or national government consultation process. For this type of consultation to be substantial, the consulted group should aim to be formally representative. An instructive example of how to establish representation quickly took place in the Greater London Council (GLC) in the early 1980s. Randall and Lovenduski document how the GLC Women's Committee (composed of cross-party councillors) prepared for consultation with council leaders by holding a number of public meetings for interested women and then electing some of the attendees on to the Committee with the councillors.<sup>63</sup> The process was obviously voluntarist and it did not, according to the authors, resolve questions about the authenticity of the representatives.<sup>64</sup> But it does show that representation can be formally established among feminists and women for consultation purposes.

The second political circumstances in which the need for organisational representation arises is in the self-organisation of the feminist alliance, especially

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<sup>63</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, op.cit., pp. 194.

<sup>64</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *ibid.*, p. 195, note how questions were raised as to whether the elected women were too competitive and thus unrepresentative, and if all groups of women were included.



where there is no external impetus for representation to be established as there was in the case of the GLC consultation. Here the very diffusion that is the hallmark of the alliance precludes long-term uniform procedures for representation. While sometimes the alliance - as a whole - will have to formalise quickly for consultation, at other times it might be that only one group within the alliance is being consulted. To cover these eventualities, there needs to be a general diffusion of the principle of representation among feminist organisations. Each group in the alliance will need to get its own house in order, so to speak, vis-à-vis representation. It can do this by electing a leadership, however rudimentary, that is revocable and accountable. This leadership could in turn liaise with the whole alliance should this be necessary.

In holding a leadership election, the group also establishes a distance between the representative and the represented. The relationship between the two becomes an impersonal and formal one as opposed to a personalised one. In the second wave movement, many feminists deliberately came together in small groups without formal structures and in which their political relationships were personal and consensual. At times of disagreement, women in these groups were forced to either conform to maintain the consensus or dissent and literally risk personal exclusion. By contrast, it is far easier to disestablish an impersonal representative relationship, and the consequences are less harsh, than it is to break free of such a personalised one. In the representative relationship, the formal bond can at least be re-negotiated if the terms are right, or it can be revoked at the next election.

It is not being pretended for one moment that establishing representation in an alliance will be an easy task or that all the problems associated with representation will magically drop away. This reading of representation expects conflict and contest to take place because it presupposes, as a condition of representation, that there can be no perfect identification between the representative and the represented. It is likely that contests will arise over the nature of what is being represented by the representative: be it political issues, the political skill to make decisions and draw up strategy or the social identity of the represented. It is thus difficult to prescribe what should be

represented in the feminist alliance. What we might fall back on as a guide is Bernard Manin's idea that an electoral selection of representatives automatically produces representatives who are distinctive from those they represent. For Manin this distinction arises because a choice must be made to vote for one candidate over another. He argues that this choice will be based on the social superiority of the candidate, but it is possible to theorise the distinction in terms of superior political skills or the saliency of particular issues.

Hence in a feminist pressure group such as Women Against Rape, the representatives would hardly need to be elected in terms of the issues they represented, as these have already been agreed as the reason for the group's existence. What might make a candidate distinctive are the different political *skills* she holds to define and convey the issues of the group in the wider political process. Many feminists may feel uneasy about electing representatives in terms of their skills, believing that women's different socialisation means that these skills are not distributed evenly, with many women yet to fulfil their potential. Valerie Bryson has argued however that to disregard skills entirely is also problematic, wasting time and productivity in the group.<sup>65</sup> Good support structures and the temporary nature of the election, moreover, should allow women to learn political skills and have a chance to use them. This skill-learning process was often ignored in the less formal arrangements of the second wave, whereby leaders 'emerged', imposed their views and were unaccountable.

In identity based feminist groups, say for example, black feminist groups who are concerned with crossover issues of gender and race, the election process might distinguish between candidates in terms of *issues* rather than political skills. In such groups we would expect a number of conflicting issues to emerge and the group could then make temporary decisions on which issues to prioritise politically, without needing to split into factions. Finally and because - as will be examined later - representation has a symbolic dimension, a feminist group which is predominantly of

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<sup>65</sup> V. Bryson, *Feminist Debates: Issues of Theory and Political Practice*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 102.



one ethnic group or religion, but claims to represent a wider cross-section of women, might choose as part of its electoral process to distinguish some candidates on the basis of their minority status vis-à-vis the group as a whole. In other words, they would be making a distinction in terms of *social identity*. It would be a symbolic step, but it would help the group maintain its legitimacy.

Hence, the call for feminists to take representation seriously is asking for three things. One, the acknowledgement that in times of diversity and fragmentation representation is the only way to establish a partial and temporary unity at any level of the alliance. Two, that formal representative mechanisms could be useful to organise a feminist alliance in varying political circumstances. And three, that the general idea of representation is important as a symbolic response to the homogenising effect of the ideal of sisterhood. To secure this symbolic aspect, it might be enough for feminists to state, 'we represent those women who...' when they voice political claims.

### **Women and feminists in representative democracy**

Many of the representative measures discussed in relation to a feminist alliance are dedicated to maintaining and establishing a separate movement from mainstream state-politics. It follows therefore that when the Chapter refers to feminists in representative democracy, it is not envisioning a permanent and institutionalised (re)presence of feminists. Rather, for both theoretical and pragmatic reasons, it is characterising a more piecemeal involvement in existing institutions of representative democracy. In keeping with this flexible approach, feminists must find their place in representative democracy on a number of different levels and in a number of different ways. Feminists should thus seek inclusion in representative democracy both as women with wider citizen concerns and as feminists.

### *Feminists in representative democracy*

The role of postmodernism in shifting feminism into a new wave indicates that feminists must come to terms with the political and its contingent reflection in existing

political practices. If feminists are to re-engage with politics then they must not chase another utopia. As Jean Bethke Elshtain has asserted, they must begin,

grappling with those powerful forms of discourse that necessarily define politics in the West...far better, it seems to me, to theorise practices and to engage in theoretical practices. This helps to keep our feet on the ground and to avoid the systematizing delusions that have plagued Western philosophy.<sup>66</sup>

Feminists must thus look at the present model of democracy in the West and ask how can they engage with it? What strategies are necessary to be heard in this model? And, how can it be improved? It is also worth noting that our experiences and expectations of democracy are partly constituted by being citizens in a representative model. It is these experiences of democracy that might resonate with women who feel distanced from second wave feminism.

What is particularly important about representative democracy for feminists is that it is amenable to the political, allowing for public engagement, conflict, decision-making and the construction of collective identities for temporary political action. Feminists, in engaging with representative democracy, engage with the distinctive features of the political and shatter the separatist dream. They learn to make their claims in public to those who may disagree with them. Representative democracy provides this sort of public confrontation through its parliamentary institutions and its electoral system. They must also bring feminist issues into political spaces beset by conflict and decision-making. In representative democracy, the need to make temporary decisions in the face of conflict is a crucial feature of the electoral process, which is further opened up by the fact that all decisions are reversible at a later date. Finally, feminists in times of diversity can stand as the partial unifying, representative figure for women who can no longer be constructed as an homogeneous social group with a common set of objectives.

Indeed, there has been an increasing emphasis among feminists, as the new wave takes force, that existing models of representative democracy have encompassed



and have been penetrated by feminist groups and ideas in a number of different political spaces. As Lovenduski and Randall summarise, 'feminists have gained important positions in state institutions and in participatory structures, widespread campaigns have mobilized new groups and generations of activists, and feminist ideas have found a place on policy agendas.'<sup>67</sup> Further, they have charted feminist involvement at all levels from local councils, through state negotiations over policy, to trade unions and political parties. A picture thus develops of feminists operating in representative democracy to introduce feminist issues and to find political representation for women, getting women involved and heard as democratic citizens. When feminists do stand in this manner, as the artificial political collective for other women and feminists in the wider political process, it is important to ensure that there are representative structures at the lower level of the alliance so that their representativeness is accounted for.

*Women citizens in representative democracy: the end of identity politics?*

Representative democracy is also a useful for model of democracy for including women as citizens as well as feminists. A generic form of representative democracy therefore seems to have two features that make it suitable for the inclusion of women as citizens, aside from their possible identity as feminists. One, it is anti-essentialist in terms of identity, being based as Anne Phillips says on 'ideas' over 'presence'<sup>68</sup> and thus, two it is not legitimated by participation, but by the representative democracy.

Representative politics can be conceptualised in an anti-essentialist manner because it is not entirely dependent on the citizen's personal identity, but her beliefs and interests. As Manin argues, our current practices of representative democracy retain the vestiges of the party system in which social identity was important and also

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<sup>66</sup> J. Bethke Elshtain, 'The Power and Powerlessness of Women,' in G. Bock and S. James (eds.), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 124.

<sup>67</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, op.cit., p. 135.

encompass more diffuse political practices in which the flux of public opinion bring issues to the fore again. As issues come to the fore again, Manin notes that, 'this resulting division [of public opinion] does not necessarily reproduce or coincide with electoral cleavages: the public may be divided along some lines in elections and along others on particular issues'.<sup>69</sup> Consequently in the representative process, the citizen can hold a number of different interests in a number of political spaces, some of which may clash. While the political beliefs and interest of a citizen may very well be derived from her sense of identity, she does not need to be present in the political process on the basis of personal identity to make these heard. The intermediary figure of the representative fulfils this presence. By way of contrast, in Young's communicative model, which privileges representation in terms of identity groups and not interest, women are determined as political actors by their gender identity that risks suggesting all women hold the same values and have the same political needs. In a representative model a woman can have feminist interests, religious interests, party interests etc. without undermining any of these. But for those who chose, it is possible to politically define oneself in accordance with one identity and to seek representation on this basis.

Representative democracy is also useful to feminism in a new wave because it is legitimated by the electoral process and not by participation. This has two consequences for women. Firstly, it allows for different levels of participation at different times so that women who do not have time for politics can chose a more minimal form of participation such as voting and still be represented. Anne Phillips concurs that, although we must not glorify the vote, it is important for setting a low threshold of participation in the system.<sup>70</sup> Secondly, existing representative democracy stands as an immutable institutional presence for those instances when the feminist alliance has broken down. In other words, it provides other political spaces for women as a kind of insurance policy when the movement is dormant or in disarray. It will be

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<sup>68</sup> A. Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 1-26, charts the progress of ideas over presence in representative democracy, believing that presence is now beginning to come back into the concept.

<sup>69</sup> B. Manin, 'The metamorphoses of representative democracy,' op.cit., p. 164.



remembered here that abortion, equal rights and sex discrimination legislation were all passed in Britain during the 1960s, when the feminist movement was relatively inactive.

### **Getting women into representative democracy**

Hence, representation allows women to find democratic inclusion in a wide range of political spaces and as citizens who might have a wide range of political identities, some of which may conflict. However, to ensure that women's inclusion in representative democracy is substantive, it is necessary to look at how women can actively seek inclusion in the model. It is important that women are seen as important political actors in representative democracy. While one way of asserting the importance of women is through feminist representatives - who have a crucial function in getting women heard politically - it is also necessary to look at the nut and bolts, so to speak, of women's representation as citizens in a representative democracy. It is particularly important that any measures to get women included do not re-essentialise them.

To this end, four factors to encourage women's inclusion in representative democracy will be examined: the symbolic nature of women's representation, women in political parties, women as voters and women's inclusion beyond identity. It is presupposed in this analysis that women also have the option of finding inclusion through feminist groups and that such groups are in themselves specific political identities for women. Hence, feminists groups should become part of the general picture of women's political representation. Moreover, this is not a set of prescriptions to get women included *as women*, because this would be to suggest that women have a set of common interests. It must be accepted that getting women included in representative democracy is a feminist project that involves getting them included in diverse political spaces and in terms of diverse interests and political concerns.

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<sup>70</sup> A. Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, op.cit., p. 112.

### *Symbolic representation*

While the fragmentation of the second wave feminist movement exposed the problems of identity politics, this is not to suggest that the discourse of identity politics has been eradicated. Indeed, the feminist concern with identity reflected a wider twentieth century attack on the neutrality of the state and its institutions. As it was argued earlier in the chapter, feminists and socialists believed that political representation should ensure that the social identity of the representative matched that of the represented. This idea is still powerful, despite the fact that social identities have become more complex. Hence, it has become standard procedure to question the representativeness of an institution in terms of whether it adequately reflects the social make-up of society. In this sense representation relies on a 'symbolic' aspect and the presence of women representatives has a symbolic function in legitimising representative institutions and signifying their inclusiveness.

However, Judith Squires warns, following Pitkin, that symbolic representation is hard to constitutionally guarantee and is often based on 'highly subjective' assessments of what counts as good representation.<sup>71</sup> It could also be added that securing women's symbolic representation in legislatures – making sure that the number of female MPs is proportionate to women's numerical social presence – does not guarantee that a 'women's position' will emerge or that there will be huge shifts in political culture in response to their presence. It is not possible to guarantee this cohesive position because, if the anti-essentialist critique is accepted, women do not necessarily share a common political stance. In light of these fears it is necessary to make sure that symbolic representation is seen as one part of a broader conception of democratic representation. It is important for the legitimacy of our representative institutions, but it remains, as Hanna Pitkin noted, a rather imprecise and loose idea. As she writes, '[w]e are emphasising the symbol's power to evoke feelings or attitudes. And we are calling attention to a vagueness, looseness, and partial quality of

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<sup>71</sup> J. Squires, 'Liberal Constitutionalism, Identity and Difference,' *Political Studies*, Vol. XLIV, (1996), p. 633.



the reference'.<sup>72</sup>

Hence, it is necessary to supplement the desire for symbolic representation with more concrete attempts to include women in representative democracy that also take account of the distinctive nature of democratic representation. It is for these reasons that feminists must present their discourse and ideas as a specific *political* identity for women. This identity does not reflect shared social status, but shared concerns and political interests. Women's only necessary relationship to each other is, as Young has theorised, one of seriality. It is not substantive and merely refers to the fact that they share the same material body. Anything other than this limited commonality, is produced by a political process of construction, alliance building and debate. Hence, it is crucial that feminists, beyond this symbolic aspect of representation, push for consultation with feminists at all levels of representative democracy. The experiences of women's representation in the GLC might indicate how this process could begin. Moreover, if these feminists groups are themselves representative, then this is one way to involve women in the system without essentialising them. Ultimately, simply increasing women's numbers in representative democracy, may mean very little if it is not supplemented with contingent and political processes of identity formation that takes account of women's political identities as feminists, business women, party members - that is to say, all the things that make up their citizenship.

### *Women as political party members*

The second step is to continue to push for the better representation of women in political parties and trade unions. Again, this is important for symbolic reasons and because of the new wave feminist concern to respect and promote women's decentred identities. To this end, it is necessary to ensure that women are included in many political spaces, in terms of the many interests and concerns that make up their citizen identity. The demand for guaranteed quota systems in political parties and trade

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<sup>72</sup> H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, op.cit., p. 96.

unions becomes one more element in the drive to get women included in all political spaces and in terms of a range of their contingent identities; as is opposed to simply pushing for women's inclusion *as women*.

However, Phillips, who has devoted much work to the use of quotas, makes several warnings about how this will pan out. First, she warns there is no guarantee that stabilising quotas for women in political parties will lead to a 'women's position' emerging in Parliament. Party divides remain very strong and eat into this commonality.<sup>73</sup> Second, Phillips holds out on whether a threshold of representation of women will change the style of politics. She suspects it will bring some changes, but writing these in stone in advance of greater inclusion is impossible and risks essentialism.<sup>74</sup> As she writes:

Changing the gender composition [of elected assemblies] cannot guarantee that women's needs or interests will then be addressed. The only secure guarantees would be those grounded in an essential identity of women, or those arrived at through mechanisms of accountability to women organized as a separate group.<sup>75</sup>

Phillips argument ultimately is that quotas can get women in, but do not guarantee anything. In light of these concerns, it is necessary to balance up the arguments for quota systems<sup>76</sup> against more structural measures to support women who are interested in politics. These structural measures might include financial support for interested women and a substantial review of parliamentary hours and childcare provision.

### *Women as voters*

The third way to get women into existing representative democracy is through the election process itself. Valerie Bryson opens up election as a feminist issue citing

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<sup>73</sup> A. Phillips, *The Politics of Presence*, op.cit., p. 76, cites the Norwegian example as evidence of this phenomenon.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>76</sup> By far the strongest argument for quota systems is that they ensure substantive numbers of women enter politics in the shortest possible time. Unfortunately, in Britain, at least, the use of quotas is somewhat tarnished by the political controversy over the Labour Party's limited use of them prior to the 1997 election.



recent electoral information showing that women in Britain are more likely to be floating voters than men and are thus additionally influential in deciding elections. She states that this has led to 'an increased sense that the vote is not an empty formality, but something which feminists can use as part of an overall strategy for real change'.<sup>77</sup> By encouraging women to use their vote, they can become important actors in the system without being institutionalised or essentialised.

### *Rethinking identity*

However, the fourth way to get women into representative democracy without essentialising them is for feminists to recognise the limits of identity politics and think in terms of issues and interests rather than identification. If feminists produce discussion on issues, these are more likely to find their way on to policy agendas and into policy networks. These are far more established methods of policy-making than those found in identity politics, which often relied on consciousness-raising to raise issues. Moreover, single issues are often the easiest way to mobilise large numbers of women to take part in feminist and other politics. Young's recent work on serial collectivity suggests how issues can be separated off from identity, allowing women to come together but in more short-term ways.<sup>78</sup>

Hence representative democracy opens up a number of levels for women to be involved as citizens and as feminists. While it would seem unwise to push for a women's party or some other such organised bloc of women, women can still be included in their specificity as women and as feminists without the risk of essentialising them. It is necessary to avoid the dilemma found in Mouffe's work, that rejecting women as an essential group precludes speaking of women's specificity in any way, so that feminism becomes lost in a wider democratic project. Lovenduski and Randall make the point, if it needs to be made again, that 'accepting that difference and

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<sup>77</sup> V. Bryson, *Feminist Debates: Issues of Theory and Political Practice*, op.cit., p. 109.

<sup>78</sup> See I. Young, 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective,' in L. Nicholson and S. Seidman (eds.), *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, (Cambridge:

competing identities are endemic does not mean that politics cannot happen. If this were the case, we would have to deny that politics ever took place'.<sup>79</sup> Feminists in a new wave, who have paid attention to the question of representation, can be central in pushing for changes in women's representation in non-essentialising ways. The crucial factor here is that feminists will have a large role to play in constructing a temporary political identity for interested women.

### **Feminist transformations of representative democracy**

So far the argument has been very cautious in suggesting what will be distinctive in increasing the representation of women. There is still a fear of essentialising women and there is the solid humanist feminist standby that until women are in the democratic process, in sufficiently equal numbers, we will have no idea of the potential changes they could deliver. What we might say, with less controversy, is that those women who have come through the feminist legacy of the second wave, as a student of feminist ideas, a member of a feminist group, or a participant in the second wave movement, have enough of a history and a sufficiently established discursive tradition, to want the modification of existing representative political practices in several ways.

Most feminists in a new wave are clearer, even clearer than those in the second wave, that the silence of some women should not be taken as a tacit acceptance that feminists can speak in their name. The response of this thesis has been to reassess feminism's structures of representation and accountability so that it explicitly acknowledges those women who it speaks for. Other responses have been forthcoming, Iris Young, for example, has suggested a range of practical measures to ensure that there is access to funding for groups who do not speak, who are not heard. The political climate of the second wave also indicates the need for the marginalised to learn political skills. To generalise then, feminists are more attuned to the perspectives of the marginalised and forgotten. On this basis we might say that getting more

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Cambridge University Press, 1995). Here, she gives some examples of women organising around issues and not simply in terms of their gender identity, pp. 208-209.



feminists in to representative democracy, if not more women, will emphasise wider issues of inclusion and political equality in times of diversity. Susan Mendus also recognises this trend, arguing, 'feminism searches for an understanding of democracy as something to be aimed at *through* difference, not something to be attained via the *removal* of difference (Mendus's italics)'.<sup>80</sup>

These issues of the unheard also encompass those questions of deliberation and the need to allow difference into political arguments that have been so important to Benhabib and Young. It is clear that representative democracy is institutionalised through deliberative assemblies that allow for the public confrontation of political actors and help to legitimise it as a political system. Hence, the arguments of feminist deliberative theorists are important for two reasons. One, to assess whether women, and other marginalised people, are really heard in these arenas. Two, to emphasise that simply increasing the number of women in deliberative situations does not mean that they will automatically be admitted to debate on the same terms given to more established political actors. While these concerns are to be treated sympathetically, they are still best achieved in existing representative institutions as opposed to, as yet unpractised, transformative deliberative political models. The advantage of representative deliberative institutions is that they are rooted in, as Mark Warren puts it, 'standard adversarial procedures'. These include secret ballots and voting and are important for Warren 'where an irreducible pluralism of interests (or time constraints) limits the capacities of deliberation to produce decisions'.<sup>81</sup>

Part of the response to ensure women are really heard is the feminist new wave concern that politics should be flexible and dynamic. We take the radical spirit of protest from the second wave and marry it with the anti-essentialist critique to see politics operating on a number of different levels, in different spheres and at different times of life. This dynamism reflects the embedded and embodied nature of the self,

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<sup>79</sup> J. Lovenduski and V. Randall, *Contemporary Feminist Politics*, op.cit., p. 91.

<sup>80</sup> S. Mendus, 'Losing the Faith: Feminism and Democracy,' in J. Dunn (ed.), *Democracy the Unfinished Journey: 508 BC to AD 1993*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 218.

which Benhabib and other feminists want to involve in politics, and its constant changes. Thus, feminists are more likely to emphasise how the institutions of representative democracy might reflect multiplicity and embeddedness with better working hours and the provision of crèches: no representative is simply a politician.

None of these add up to a promise of a new politics, a homogeneous feminist or women's viewpoint, but they are vistas on a life in which politics is important and accepted but is no longer crushing and defeatist. It is the start and not the end of the political story which in the 1980s threatened to re-marginalise women. Representative democracy then is not to be seen as a panacea for all of feminism's ills. It is rather a framework in which they can start to address these problems and possibly rebuild a feminist alliance and re-engage women with citizenship. In this process, feminist issues will always be contested and a vibrant feminist movement as an alliance should be protected where possible. But its very precariousness means we must get women into representative democracies and at all levels. This is important for both political equality and in terms of symbolism.

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<sup>81</sup> M. Warren, 'What Should We Expect From More Democracy? Radically Democratic Responses to Politics,' *op.cit.*, p. 266.



## Conclusion

It was suggested in the Chapter One that feminism is on the edge of a new wave, in which the politics of citizenship will be central. Most feminists have left behind the separatist dreams of the second wave movement and have looked to more inclusive, and dare it be said, conventional political models. The aim of this thesis has been to show that these changes are desirable, rejuvenating feminist politics and political theory. To this end Chapter Two discussed the role postmodern theories have played in shifting feminism into this new wave: emphasising the anti-essential nature of the feminist political subject, the difficulties in formulating universal, non-contingent feminist theories of oppression and the problems of second wave utopian political thinking and its denial of difference. However, it was concluded that feminist analysis has not become determined by postmodern thought and has developed its own concerns and strategies.

New wave feminists, then, have two political concerns. They want to rebuild and nourish a feminist movement of some sort and ensure that women are included in democratic models of citizenship as feminists, as well as other types of political actors. In terms of rebuilding the feminist movement, it seems likely that any future movement will be united as a loose alliance or coalition to take account of the differences between women and the varying interpretations of feminist politics that exist. Indeed, it is possible that in the diffuse social conditions of Western life, there will never again be a structured, widespread feminist movement as there was in the first and second waves. In this situation, feminists need to consider other political strategies that will incorporate conventional institutions, pressure groups and single-issue politics. These allow for a plurality of political spaces for feminists and women after fragmentation, reflecting the diversity of their concerns.

Whatever the future structure of feminism as a political movement, its politics will be dynamic, precarious and contingent. Indeed, the history of feminist politics is infused with these very features, and they bring to feminist political battles both the benefits of flexibility and the disadvantages of fragmentation. However, these features

of feminist politics also make it imperative that feminists understand and theorise clear institutions and procedures for women's inclusion. Such institutions and procedures can stand as other political spaces for women to find a political voice in the absence of a feminist movement or even when they feel that a feminist alliance does not represent them. For these reasons, feminists in the new wave want to conceive of inclusive democratic models of citizenship, where well defined procedures and mechanisms ensure that women and marginalised groups have access to decision-making procedures.

Feminists are currently theorising numerous models of democratic citizenship. Three of the most important and influential have been considered in Chapters Three, Four and Five: Seyla Benhabib's model of deliberative democracy, Iris Young's model of communicative democracy and Chantal Mouffe's model of agonal democracy. Each of these models has contributed to the concerns of new wave feminism, looking at the future of feminist movement politics and theorising how to get women included and heard in democratic politics as feminists and as citizens. It was argued that Mouffe's model of agonal democracy is particularly important because it pays detailed attention to the distinctive nature of the political. She notes how political relationships are messy, conflict-ridden and often exclusionary, and argues that political institutions need to reflect these features. However, the thesis concluded that all three thinkers ultimately desired a transformative kind of democratic politics, in which feminist concerns are transformed by the civil process of creating a common interest.

It is not desirable or practicable to expect transformative political relationships. Not only does it appear inherently utopian, but it also strips feminist claims of their basis in power and positions them as neat additions to the collective, civic good. As it was argued in Chapter Five, feminists need to recognise the power and interest claims of their political demands, to be aware when they might cause dissent and conflict. This type of awareness is important if feminists are to re-engage with politics. In short, feminists need democratic models of citizenship that respond to the political as a



conflictual, contingent and public process. In this process feminists will confront others who will not be sympathetic to their demands and thus it cannot be assumed that a transformative political relationship will occur in which conflicts of interest disappear. What is more important is that the political relationship is procedurally legitimate, that authoritative decisions can be made in the face of conflict and compromises reached. Consequently, existing models of representative democracy were considered to look at how they met women's concerns as both citizens and as feminists with specific political demands.

There is no disputing the fact that the representative model of democratic citizenship is contentious for many feminists. These feminists have tended since the second wave to view it as inherently exclusionary, and have instead favoured participatory models; working on the assumption that the bodily presence and commitment of women is the best way to change attitudes and get women's voices heard. Chapter Six therefore trod a somewhat cautious path to defend and open up representative democracy to feminism. It explored how representative democracy has historically developed into a diverse, dynamic and contingent set of institutional practices and theoretical visions. With this type of history, it is able to accommodate a range of political actors, with a range of political interests and different levels of political commitment.

It was then possible to show that representative democracy had several features that made it distinctive and useful for feminists in the new wave who want to get women into democratic politics as plural political actors, as feminists and as citizens. At root, the representative model, through the separation between the representative and the represented and the use of regular democratic elections, establishes a formal and authoritative political relationship. Consequently, women can create this political relationship without having to share a common essential identity with other political actors in the process. It is also possible to establish the representative relationship in relation to a number of different political commodities. Thus, it can stand for the representation of numerous private interests, a single national interest or a set of

pressure group interests. It is also possible that a social identity can be represented, as long as it is recognised that the representative will never be the pure embodiment of it.

The representative democratic relationship therefore is open to plurality and flexibility and is well suited for feminism in a new wave in which women may want political inclusion as feminists and as citizens. They can seek representation in terms of a number of different elements of their identity and at a number of different levels - political party, trade union, feminist alliance etc.- without determining themselves permanently in terms of one political identity. Moreover, representative mechanisms at the movement level make it accountable; it only speaks for those women who participate in its representative procedures.

This thesis is only the start of defining feminism in a new wave. It has drawn together the elements of the past twenty years of feminism and has sought to understand them and to speculate about the future of feminist political theory. Most importantly, it has suggested that the contingent political conditions of the West may not be the worst place for a rejuvenated feminism and that they could actually be useful in making feminism more attractive to those women who felt alienated by the second wave and its legacy.



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