

Feminism and Space: Towards a Reflexive Citizenship

¹Charalambos Tsekeris and ²Nicos Katrivesis

¹University of Peloponnese, Department of Communication Sciences and Technology, Tripoli, Greece

²University of Macedonia, Department of Economics, Thessalonica, Greece

Abstract: This article seeks to critically describe and explain the antagonistic relationships between feminist knowledge/politics and the modernist private/public divide, within the context of reflexive methodology. The reification of this divide has undoubtedly been inductive to women's seclusion, marginalization and exclusion from the democratic light of the so-called "public sphere" (Habermas). However, the feminist "politicization of experience" has brought the Private (the self, the familial, the domestic and the intimate) into a close dialectical relationship with the Public. Within this analytic framework, the agonistic (individual/collective) concept of "citizenship" is reflexively decontextualized from its unnecessarily reductionistic legal connotations and dynamically transformed into a contested *critical sociocultural process* (in flux), which radically cuts across the received private/public dualism and promises the emergence of a strengthened cosmopolitan civil society. Contrary to current orthodoxies, the issue here is indeed the real progressive concern for the (multicultural) human condition and the politics/ethics of difference-not the how and where.

Key words: Feminism • space • reflexivity • citizenship

INTRODUCTION

Feminism, more than any other social movement, systematically attempted to include the historically neglected field of subjective meanings and personal experiences in the critical analysis of the social and cultural world and, in particular, of the deeply gendered (and racialized) nature of the social and cultural institutions. This reflexive inclusion is a particular "critical method" (MacKinnon) for understanding and qualitatively changing reality. From the very start of the "feminist renaissance" (in the 1960s and the 1970s), academic feminism, predominantly located in sociology, has fruitfully re-energized fundamental questions of the mainstream sociology of (scientific) knowledge.

In general, the feminist critique of the "androcentric" social sciences employs three interrelated anti-foundationalist/anti-essentialist epistemological tactics, increasingly prioritizing the central idea of (female) subjectivity. First, "feminist empiricism" naturalizes epistemology (*towards a social theory of knowledge*) and emphatically introduces women *as scientists and as participants* (creatively mixing referential/critical and endogenous/instrumental forms of reflexivity), so that their normative concerns become substantially unavoidable and further stressed.

Second, "standpoint epistemology", which has drawn fire from Marxism as well as from postmodernist philosophy, starts from the radical position that all knowledge and all social identities are precariously constructed and performed from a specific social location. Mannheim's sociological "holy trinity" (class, race, gender) is overwhelmingly influential to any form of cultural production. The sovereign (eurocentric), totalizing view from "nowhere" (or "everywhere") is forever impossible. There is no universal, context-free, or "innocent knowledge" (Jane Flax). In other words, perspectivism is always inescapable [1]. What is actually important here is "*who needs truth?*" [2]. According to this "reflexive"

Corresponding Author: Dr. Charalambos Tsekeris, University of Peloponnese, Department of Communication Sciences and Technology, Tripoli, Greece

approach, however, less partial knowledge can possibly result when those who have previously been marginalized or excluded from the dominant order (status quo) become actively involved in the essentially contested knowledge-production process.

Third, “feminist post-structuralism”, which in principle disavows the realist (western) concepts of “representation”, “false consciousness” and “distortion”, stresses that judgments about truth and falsity are themselves always performatively constructed and negotiated, because they are inescapably partisan in character and necessarily informed by moral, political and cultural concerns. It also interconnects “womanhood” and “motherhood” (and even “race”) with social and interpretative processes and looks for meanings that are taken for granted, hidden and suppressed, strategically privileging quality over quantity, culture over nature, relations over substances, constructions over essences. Science does not hold a mirror to nature. The so-called “social text” is now creatively re-written by the feminist researcher-in close collaboration with her research subjects.

THE POLITICIZED PRIVATE

Indisputably, the common denominator of these subversive “epistemological tactics” is the strong insistence that feminist politics and feminist knowledge should work out from women’s subjectivities. In a more methodological way, Sandra Harding asserts that, in order to gain a reflexively critical view of society, the best method is to start thought from “women’s lives” [3]. Women’s lived experiences are therefore drawn upon to enrich scholarship and scientific theories as well as to offer the necessary epistemological basis for *consciousness raising* where the personal can become political. As Catharine MacKinnon observes, feminist theory is perhaps the first theory to emerge from those whose interest it affirms [4]. As a consequence, the Private becomes strategically re-valued in relation to the Public. Contrary to conventional, dualistic (dichotomizing) ways of thinking about the Private and the Public, private actions are politically meaningful and, to use Zygmunt Bauman’s words, “private problems are translated into the language of public issues” [5].

Increasingly, feminist practice has successfully challenged the “old” or “traditional” (rigid) boundaries of politics, moving attention towards the overlooked private field of everyday life and relationships. Hence, its manifestations can be seen not only in the overtly political arena, but also in activities not conventionally theorized as political, in the enactment of *small revolutions in the here-and-now*. By the mid-1960s, indeed, second-wave feminists effectively deepened first-wave criticism (namely, Virginia Woolf, Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, Juliet Mitchell, Shulamith Firestone) by explicitly interrogating the complex relations between public and family/personal life.

In particular, adopting a sociological-rather than an unnecessarily restrictive and purist legal-stance, they challenged the modern manichean contrast between the public domain as “artificial” or “constraining”-that is, as equated to necessity and disinterestedness-and the home as a “private castle” (or an emotionally loaded, apolitical “world of freedom”), behind which men (male citizens) enjoy rewards of their labour outside the family. According to this pernicious cultural contrast, women and children are doomed to be confined to a space characterized by the cultivation and protection of individuality, as well as by intimacy, seclusion and “personal fulfilment”.

In the last instance, second-wave feminism offered women a valuable public language to express themselves, to break the silences of personal life, to communicate their suppressed personal despair and to gain access to the benefits of democratic citizenship. Personal choices are regarded as intrinsically political (“everything is political”). The Private does not signify a “power-free”, “exclusive”, “isolated”, “closed” space (or a “space of silence”) any more. On the contrary, it is a particular meaningful kind of “political community”, with duties and rights, performatively structured by relations of power and open to contestation and change through multiple forms of everyday human action. Its relationship with the Public constitutes an uncertain, permanently undecidable, historically contingent and socially constructed *process* of “dynamic negotiation” (Stuart Hall).

Such a dialogical approach allows women not to sacrifice emotions to reason and domestic matters to public affairs. Private and public matters are not mutually excluded or mutually reducible; they can indeed co-exist in an absolutely

balanced and harmonious way. Both the Public and the Private can be thought as symbolic/physical (or symbolic/material) spheres of continual, agonistic political struggles (broadly conceived) and comprehensive transformative action, composed of rational/emotional knowledgeable subjects working toward the common good.

In addition, they can be thought as having equal significance for critically re-understanding the social practices and cultural meanings of citizenship. This is closely associated with “furthering a project of rethinking citizenship and its relationship to space, whether classified as private or public” [6]. In other words, the innovative feminist idea that “the personal is political”, a knowledge-political slogan which initially became popular in the 1970s and radically de-reified the culturally sanctioned and gender-biased public/private distinction, is now offering us a valuable analytic lens through which we can alternatively view citizenship (as “membership in a community”), beyond its conventional, universalist/rationalist socio-legal status, formally defined by T.H. Marshall [7].

THE REFLEXIVE DIMENSION

Citizenship can be also “private”, by constantly exercising normative responsibilities and consensus (through conflict), reason and free dialogue, conceived as an on-going “act of creation”, virtue and “phronesis” (practical wisdom), tolerance and friendship. It thus becomes reflexively sensitized—that is, *a way of being simultaneously in private and in public*. In an ideal-typical (and perhaps programmatic) level, this new broader/borderless form of *reflexive citizenship*, as a kind of non-linear system, self-critically turns into itself, discovering its limitations and weaknesses, gender/racial biases and temporal/spatial dimensions, ambiguities and potentialities, as well as revising, re-inventing and enriching its normative orientation and value vocabulary, within a complex “global risk society” (Beck). It reflects upon its own history and perspectives, where it has been and where it is going. It also strongly emphasizes its *practical/discursive* and inter-contextual/cultural—rather than theoretical/propositional and formal-properties, linking radical politics to everyday life and local issues (*soft and low politics*), in the light of the on-going flows of new advanced technologies, mobile markets and heterogeneous immigrant populations [8].

Most importantly, the reflexive expansion, pluralization and deepening of (self-confronted) citizenship enables both the Private and the Public to systematically complement and reinforce each other, mutually contributing to the democratic renewal of civil society and to the everyday struggles against symbolic manipulation and *cultural/symbolic exclusion*. By using the feminist methodological tool of reflexivity, this kind of re-conceptualization of citizenship is able to further foster respect for irreducible differences (dialectically interrelating unity and diversity, sociality and individuality) and consolidate multiculturalism on the level of political culture. It therefore responds to the urgent and pressing contemporary need for a serious, non-eurocentric “comparative sociology/anthropology/history” (Nicos Mouzelis), based on the radical pedagogical desire to produce incisive post-colonial cultural critique, to cultivate a new sociological imagination, or an “aesthetic of existence” (Foucault) and to understand ourselves better—that is, to see ourselves “through the eyes of the other” (Heinz von Foerster) and discover an alternative cultural life conduct: “We are the persons we are in virtue of our relations with others” [9].

Both the Private and the Public can comprehensively reinforce progressive politics, by maximizing the chances of cultural resistance and “social learning” (John Barry), as well as by promoting active participation of *all* citizens in building more equal social orders, more just and sustainable (political) communities. In the context of a feminism-inspired reflexive citizenship, which self-consciously seeks to formulate a new normative agenda, the feminist challenge of “theorizing experience” (Mohanty) dynamically interacts with the political challenge of “democratising democracy” (Giddens). This articulates a fluid view of the (modular) citizen who can live in the private and the public as well as in the local and the global at the same time.

CONCLUSIONS

Arguably, reflexive citizenship signifies a new radical possibility for omnipresent *emancipative* “life politics” (Giddens), for the development of a more inclusive, multilogical and cosmopolitan civic culture and for the generalized defense of the rights of the individual based on the principles of liberty and equality. It also signifies the vital everyday need to collaboratively foster spatial democratic consciousness and moral responsibility, capacity for self-assertion (self-government, autonomy) and conversation that facilitates critical learning through open, genuine dialogue, encouraging a flexible “politics of voice” (Raymond Williams). This can substantially alter continued structural social/racial inequalities and increasingly generate the enabling conditions for an empowering “*glocal*” *civil society* in which space is provided for the marginalised/oppressed and silenced sections of society.

REFERENCES

1. Pels, D., 1997. Strange Standpoints, or: How to Define the Situation for Situated Knowledge. *Telos*, 108: 65-91.
2. Harding, S., 1992. After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics and “Strong Objectivity”. *Social Research*, 59(3): 567-87.
3. Harding, S., 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
4. MacKinnon, C., 1989. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
5. Bauman, Z., 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
6. Fenton, L., 2005. Citizenship in Private Space. *Space and Culture*, 8(2): 180-192.
7. Marshall, T. H., 1950. *Citizenship and social class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
8. Ong, A., 2006. Mutations in Citizenship. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2-3): 499-505.
9. Fay, B., 1996. *Contemporary philosophy of social science*. Oxford: Blackwell.