Ancient Dead White Males and the Future of Feminism

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ABSTRACT
Aristotle presents a very public notion of the concept of citizenship in his classic work Politics. His notion of what constitutes a “productive” citizen triggered feminist scholars such as Jean Bethke Elshtain and Mary Dietz into debate about how classical conceptions of citizenship impact women’s lives and their political participation. This essay provides some background on Aristotle’s definition of citizenship and details how Elshtain and Dietz sought to frame feminist conceptions of citizenship relative to Aristotle’s theory. Also discussed are possible approaches for feminists seeking to reformulate notions of citizenship. Of particular concern is the need to devise a theory that is less biased towards Western women and the issues that they face.

INTRODUCTION
The concept of citizenship poses intriguing and often-times troubling issues for political theorists seeking to understand the dynamics of a polity. Classics of Western philosophy, notably Aristotle’s Politics, attempted to define a “citizen” and his role within the state. Indeed, a “citizen” was more than a mere denizen. Ultimately, taking part in the judicial administration of the state (Aristotle 1275b 20) was the essential characteristic of Aristotle’s citizen. This citizen was a man whose political powers distinguished his role from slaves and from his “nonpublic” role as a householder. Such narrow and exclusionary notions of political participation influenced scholars, politicians and the general populace to uphold patriarchal norms regarding who and what actions defined a citizen.

Indeed, many women have struggled to distance societal attitudes from Aristotle’s limited view of citizenship and the consequent degradation of women and the home. Undoubtedly, feminists have been successful in expanding women’s options at home and in the workplace. What use then, politically and theoretically, could contemporary feminists make of the traditional Western canon of political philosophy, other than to attack its oppressive features?

The thoughts of ancient dead white males, as some feminist scholars illustrate, do have relevance for the women’s movement as we enter the 21st century. These thoughts offer a crucial starting point for discussions on revitalizing democratic values for a variety of women, from homemakers to executives.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, though critical of Aristotle, but nonetheless an admirer of Sophocles, is one feminist scholar who referred to the classics in search of a theory with which to re-focus popular feminist thought.

Indeed, as political theory broadened over the centuries, feminism began to challenge the Aristotelian emphasis on the public nature of citizenship through public deliberation, law-making, or serving on a jury. Certainly, Aristotle’s views of women as “misbegotten men” whose courage is shown through obedience (Aristotle 1260a 23-24) are repugnant by most standards today, feminist or not. However, for theorists like Elshtain, the important task for women’s liberation resides not only in the rejection of such attitudes, but also in the reversal of values that uphold the primacy of the public sphere over the private realm of the home. Thus, for Elshtain, theoretical and political possibilities lie in a brand of feminism that elevates “the deepest and most resonant ties” of the family to the primary realm of human existence. She categorizes this ideology as “social feminism” (Elshtain 304).

Yet for many feminists, any further mystification of this private sphere serves to perpetuate the inequities women have traditionally endured through their confinement to the home. Mary Dietz has reviewed various responses to this type of claim. Many feminists, such as Betty Friedan, encouraged women to break from the limitations of undervalued housework that hindered their psychological development (Friedan 65). Thus, Friedan’s advice to women was to find “meaningful” work in the public workforce. Some feminists from a Marxist school of thought liken labor in the home to a private form of bourgeois exploitation, resulting in inequities that could possibly be remedied by women entering the public sphere of “valued” activity.

In her essay “Citizenship with a Feminist Face,” Dietz herself joined the critics of social feminism’s interpretation of what it means to be a productive citizen. Her argument against Elshtain’s theory focused on its narrow definition of women as creatures of the home.
as well as on social feminism’s efforts to maternalize, rather than politicize conceptions of citizenship. Interpretations of Aristotle’s work on the distinction of the public world of the polis and the private world of the household can, according to Dietz, be “deprecative” or “generous,” each providing a different interpretation when guiding feminist readings of his political thought.

In this essay, I will join the critics of social feminism’s goals and abilities to reverse a tradition of political theory that does not sanctify the private sphere to the extent of Elshtain’s wishes. Rather, I will agree with Dietz on certain points and discuss an alternative direction for feminist political thought in order to put forth a theory and course of action that may better serve women as citizens and as human beings.

ARISTOTLE, ELSTHAINT AND THE HOUSEHOLD

Like the laborers to whom he denied the benefits of the “honors” of the state (Aristotle 1278a 36) due to their absorption with menial, time consuming labor, Aristotle viewed the child-rearing and the housekeeping duties of the private sphere as inferior tasks when compared to the more visible, vocal and public world of the active citizenry of males.

While Aristotle certainly drew a sharp distinction between the public and private worlds of the polis, it was his elevation of the public arena that provided the impetus for critics like Elshtain. For social feminists, this public realm is laden with corruption and self-interest, vices that according to Elshtain, must be tempered through the care and nurturing in families. Similar to the radical-cultural feminists who believe that the source of women’s liberation resides in women’s biological abilities to reproduce as well as in their socialized abilities to nurture, Elshtain takes what Dietz calls a deprecative or pessimistic reading of Aristotle’s emphasis on the public to the other extreme. As Dietz puts it, Elshtain “stands Aristotle on his head” (Dietz 26) by emphasizing the virtues of women in the home to men of the supposedly corrupt public world. The patriarchal norms put forth by thinkers such as Aristotle, Elshtain claims, serve to strip women of an essential aspect of their existence, that being the validity of the care that they provide to those in their private domain.

Certainly, Elshtain is not the only feminist to theoretically distance herself from liberal feminism’s focus on emancipating women from the tedious silence of the home and into the public sphere of “visible” careers. Yet despite some support, social feminism has its critics who have identified some important problems. Dietz, for instance, discusses the theoretical challenges of defining a “family” and establishing a correlation between mothering and a less corrupt public sphere. Elshtain’s model, however, raises some interesting political challenges as well. For instance, certain conservative groups have suggested that mothers should be subsidized to remain in the home, a policy that supposedly would produce more emotionally stable citizens, therefore alleviating many social problems. Thus, mothers would become employees of this “corrupt” state, making the personal political to a great extent. It would be interesting to know Elshtain’s views on this proposal. Given the argument she constructs in “Antigone’s Daughters,” are we supposed to presume that Elshtain believes that women have some sort of innate biological or social resistance to withstand the seaminess of this public world, thus being able to “purify” it through maternalization? Unfortunately, not all families are exemplars of care or of citizenship. Thus, elevating the flawed institution of the family would only serve to rearrange the political supremacy from one sphere to another. Instead, a radical restructuring of attitudes regarding women and their roles in society is necessary for genuine social change. Certainly, the fallibility of human beings results in the imperfection of all institutions, public or private. Thus, a more egalitarian society in which the public and private realms are simultaneously considered and respected would better provide for the common good. Most importantly, we must realize that a mere shifting of the primacy from the public to the private sphere would not resolve most of the inequities which result from uninformed and misinformed attitudes. Elshtain is unclear how a social feminist society would change minds without engaging in the similar abuses of power and degradation that feminists so vigorously protest.

DIETZ’ INTERPRETATION

In her critique of Elshtain, Dietz notes that, despite Aristotle’s language, his general lessons in the necessity of an active citizenry and the call for citizens to strive for the common good in the public realm remain worthy democratic goals. Dietz illustrates this by offering a critique of Elshtain’s reading of Sophocles’ character of Antigone as a noble representative of the family who is martyred when she rebels against the “statecraft” enforced by King Creon (Elshtain 305). Dietz reads Antigone as a citizen whose political difference is brought to bear on another citizen’s (Creon) opposing opinion. This interpretation seems more empowering to citizens who can relate to the political and personal struggles of Antigone. Indeed, this tragic Greek heroine is the theoretical epitome of the personal made political. She symbolizes two complex, inextricable worlds that feminists must strive to address simultaneously if feminist theory is to remain scholastically relevant and politically applicable.

In achieving this, classics such as Aristotle’s Politics can offer more subtle lessons along with the obvious
desirability of seeing one another as a part of a greater scheme striving for the collective welfare (Aristotle, Bk I, 1253a 25-27). In Book III of *Politics*, for example, Aristotle continually revises his definition of a "citizen" in order to accommodate various scenarios. After his general definition of the concept, "one who takes part" in the affairs of the state (1275b 20), he then proceeds to elaborate that while mechanisms generally should not be considered citizens due to their distractions caused by laboring (1278a 8), circumstances of democracy mean they seldom abide by this recommendation. Aristotle may not like this fact, yet he nonetheless acknowledged the situation. Despite his bias against such laborers, this acknowledgment makes his general ideas more adaptable to future circumstances, a fact that sometimes gives feminists trouble.

Although it is unclear in "Citizenship with a Feminist Face," Dietz appears, through her discussion of "politicalizing" rather than "maternalizing" consciousness, to fit the category of a liberal feminist. While liberal feminism continues to make undeniable contributions to the lives of women, it is nonetheless a movement that is frequently faulted for its tendencies to address the concerns of white, educated, *Western* women. At one point, Dietz notes that women share a common political situation with other women (Dietz 34). Indeed, this may be true, but if feminism is to remain a personally relevant and engaged political set of theories, it must address the concerns of women who are very different from Western women. What theoretical attempts will be formulated to understand and to accommodate their struggles as citizens? Will classics of Western philosophy be applicable to their lives? Dietz makes a convincing presentation (30-35) on the benefits to the family of acting politically (such as securing policies that assist families and children). Her theory illustrates how feminists, and society in general, must acknowledge democratic citizenship as more than a single-dimensioned concept divided into abstract realms. However, greater possibilities lie in a more multi-cultural approach to feminism and to citizenship. This approach respects cultural differences to the extent that it does not marginalize women whose cultural norms encourage them, for example, to remain "nonpolitical" in the home. Moreover, with a great number of women living under non-democratic governments in developing countries, feminists must be more willing to understand the plight of these women by examining how, and if, they seek to influence their non-democratic governments.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Elshtain and Dietz provide valuable perspectives on politics and theory. As Elshtain is dismayed by the seemingly amoral public sphere of the polis, she advocates that we turn to the family as a bastion of morality traditionally upheld by women. But political and theoretical problems, as well as the difficulties in changing attitudes, pose significant obstacles to the implementation of Elshtain’s theory on a large scale.

Mary Dietz, however, provides a more complete theory of women and citizenship through her critique of social feminism. In her work, the public and the private are inextricable, with sharp splits serving only to further alienate women from the benefits of democratic citizenship. From a political and theoretical standpoint, Dietz’ argument is more relevant to the goal of understanding and strengthening democratic citizenship. While her theory recognizes that citizenship is not one-dimensional, feminism must, if it seeks to improve the lives of all women, further expand its scholarship and activism beyond Western culture.

The influence of Western theorists, such as Aristotle, remains an important starting point for discussions on citizenship. Despite his obvious bias against women, Aristotle nonetheless provides valuable observations that can be tailored to support modern movements. From him we can learn the importance of remaining personally relevant and engaged political set of theories. As Elshtain and Dietz make his general ideas more adaptable to likely circumstances, we see Aristotle's recommendation. Although it is unclear in "Citizenship with a Feminist Face," Dietz appears, through her discussion of "politicalizing" rather than "maternalizing" consciousness, to fit the category of a liberal feminist. While liberal feminism continues to make undeniable contributions to the lives of women, it is nonetheless a movement that is frequently faulted for its tendencies to address the concerns of white, educated, *Western* women. At one point, Dietz notes that women share a common political situation with other women (Dietz 34). Indeed, this may be true, but if feminism is to remain a personally relevant and engaged political set of theories, it must address the concerns of women who are very different from Western women. What theoretical attempts will be formulated to understand and to accommodate their struggles as citizens? Will classics of Western philosophy be applicable to their lives? Dietz makes a convincing presentation (30-35) on the benefits to the family of acting politically (such as securing policies that assist families and children). Her theory illustrates how feminists, and society in general, must acknowledge democratic citizenship as more than a single-dimensioned concept divided into abstract realms. However, greater possibilities lie in a more multi-cultural approach to feminism and to citizenship. This approach respects cultural differences to the extent that it does not marginalize women whose cultural norms encourage them, for example, to remain "nonpolitical" in the home. Moreover, with a great number of women living under non-democratic governments in developing countries, feminists must be more willing to understand the plight of these women by examining how, and if, they seek to influence their non-democratic governments.

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