

Mary Hawkesworth

*Gender and Political Theory: Feminist Reckonings*

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The goal of Mary Hawkesworth's *Gender and Political Theory* is to explore the operations of state power that are typically excluded from canonical accounts of political theory, including the role of the state in the creation of subordinated and stigmatized subjects. One of the unique contributions of the book is that it seeks to draw insights from critical race, feminist, postcolonial, queer, and trans theory in order to denaturalize the ways in which the dichotomous constructions of sex and gender have become configured. Binary categorizations, argues Hawkesworth, fail to do justice to the complexity, fluidity, and historically specific possibilities of human embodiment (15).

The book importantly disrupts a number of key myths about the field of political theory: first, that conventional political theory concepts—such as the state, justice, human nature, the public and private, citizenship—belong to the canon, and cannot be claimed by those on the margins. Second, this book reminds us that what has become the canon of political theory is in fact of very recent origin; although the Western canon is a tradition that starts from classical antiquity, the main texts of the canon did not actually develop until the second half of the nineteenth century as part of a new curriculum being offered in secularizing universities in Europe and the United States. The third myth is that political theory is best read in terms of naturalized binaries.

Chapter 1 raises some key feminist questions, including, for example: What is woman? What is man? Is the man/woman binary the best way to understand sexed embodiment? As Hawkesworth reminds us, there are no ready answers in the Western tradition of political theory, beyond depicting sex and gender as natural and prepolitical. To counter this sexism, she draws from intersectional theories to debunk the idea of the universal subject, specifically by noting that gender is not independent of such factors as race, class, or sexuality. The author also draws from postcolonial theories to question the naturalized position of inferiority of the so-called global South and of indigenous peoples, as well as the racial codings of European man and European woman. In addition, Hawkesworth highlights that queer theory denaturalizes the link between men=masculinity and women=femininity, and instead conceptualizes bodies as being more varied in terms of sexuality. Finally, she brings trans theory to the forefront to debunk the notion that there are only two configurations of the male and female body, and that sex is fixed from birth. In bringing together these approaches, Hawkesworth sets the scene for those entering the field of political

theory to question the false neutrality of political life and the main texts of conventional political theory.

Chapter 2 traces contrasting accounts of the origin and meanings of gender, and then compares sociobiological, linguistic, feminist, and queer theories of sex, sexuality, and gender. The author notes that gender as a category that denoted masculine and feminine only really emerged in the decade after Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex*. Before that, understandings of gender were entwined with the binary of culture/nature. Here, one of the criticisms Hawkesworth raises is that feminists treat sex as distinctly biological and gender as distinctly social. Drawing on linguistics, feminists then questioned the language that was being used to treat gender as universal, noting that in some languages, gender differentiations were central, whereas in others they were totally absent. Despite feminist science studies scholars' and social science scholars' attempts to account for gender variance, Hawkesworth notes that they tended to replicate the idea of a natural sexual dimorphism. This was more fundamentally questioned by queer theories, which made clear that the study of sexuality was not the same as the study of gender, and that the study of anti-homophobia was not the same as feminist inquiry. This insight illuminated the ways in which heterosexuality operated as a political structure of domination that could be distinguished from patriarchy. As one would expect, Hawkesworth goes on to dismiss the biological reductionist accounts of sex and gender, but interestingly, she is also critical of accounts of sex and gender that are based on performativity, as in the work of Judith Butler, and on structure.

Chapter 3 examines some of the claims about embodiment made in Western political theory, and in doing so raises questions about the adequacy of accounts of human nature. Hawkesworth is particularly critical of the ways in which the experiences of some elite, white, European men are conflated with the experiences of all humans in the canon of political theory. In this chapter, she also importantly problematizes how the Western canon assumes the superiority of humans over nonhuman animals; and how philosophical accounts of natural race and sex differences marked the violent production of separate spheres for men and women in which Europeans were seen as superior, men of color feminized, women of color masculinized, and how gender inequality within communities of color was exacerbated under colonization. She concludes that because Western political theorists relied on naturally given accounts of the subject, they also entrenched notions of dichotomous sex, procreational heterosexuality, and hierarchies of race under the guise of nature.

Chapter 4 examines how designations of the public and private have racialized and gendered material consequences. Feminists, she argues, have revealed a public/private distinction to illuminate and challenge forms of power and domination in the domains of family, sexuality, embodiment, and subjectivity. In this chapter, Hawkesworth takes to task liberal theories of social contract, privacy, negative liberties, and limited state power to show the inherent contradictions in the constructions of the public and private.

Chapter 5 analyzes the claim that the state is impartial and governed by rational procedures that are neutral, designed to foster formal equality before the law. Hawkesworth touches on conceptions of the state by Hobbes, liberals, Weber, Marx, new institutionalists, and Foucault to illustrate the versatility of theories of the state. She notes that feminists have long identified that the state is a gendered institution, but she also seeks to emphasize the insights of critical race scholars, indigenous scholars, and queer scholars who have shown that the state plays a crucial role in producing racialized, class-based, and sexualized subjects and citizens.

In chapter 6, Hawkesworth conceptualizes justice and injustice from the perspective of gender identity and bodies. After discussing the ways in which Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Hegel, Rawls, and Walzer approach questions of justice, she turns her attention to state injustices that are produced through racialized violence, gendered exclusions and insecurity, and identity invalidation particularly around gender variance. Somewhat surprisingly, she does not just note the limitations of state-based approaches to justice—including the fact that state injustices are often left out of conventional political theory in the production of inequalities—but she envisions social transformation beyond the scope of the state.

One of the key strengths of the book is that it has a very clear political commitment, namely to show how feminist theory can be used in the service of social justice by unsettling conventional mindsets, challenging oppressive power binaries, and questioning structural inequalities and asymmetrical life opportunities. As Hawkesworth states,

Despite diverse analytical approaches, contemporary feminist theory routinely involves this disidentification of some of the guiding precepts of political theory, such as the norm of the neutral, distanced, dispassionate analysis, in the quest for universal explanations. Attuned to ambiguity and indeterminacy, and committed to an ethics of freedom, they refuse to accredit essentialized gender oppositions or invariant modes of domination and subordination, analyzing instead the intersectional operations of power within particular institutions. By troubling false universals and confining stereotypes, this form of feminist theorizing seeks to enable new ways of thinking, thereby creating the conditions of possibility for new modes of social, political, and intellectual life. (193)

In her concluding chapter, the author notes that critical race, feminist, indigenous, postcolonial, queer, and trans theory create a democratic culture beyond frameworks of dualism, one that is based on enriching coexistence with others, solidarity among groups, and trickle-up social justice grounded in intersectional activism.

Despite good intentions, as Hawkesworth herself notes, her reading of political theory concepts is still very much confined within the Western ambit. This is the challenge for those of us who critically engage with canonical readings: how to mitigate the epistemological and ontological assumptions of “the canon” when we have been trained within the confines of that very tradition? What, for example, would it mean to include non-Western oral knowledge of such concepts as sex and gender? What if political theory were approached in terms of the interconnections among land, humans, and nonhumans, as indigenous philosophy teaches? Furthermore, are binarized modes of thinking intrinsically limiting, or might we examine power relations through *multiple, criss-crossing* binaries, as Dean Saranillio does in his study of relations among Asians, Indigenous peoples, and white settlers in Hawaiʻi? Moreover, although Hawkesworth thoughtfully integrates critical approaches to the canon of political theory, key thinkers within these same critical traditions may well advocate that we *turn away from the canon* of political theory, blow it up, or at the very least make it irrelevant. In other words, why try to rescue the canon of political theory at all?

Despite these questions, the book is an important resource for feminists who take seriously questions of difference. It is especially well suited to introductory political theory courses because it brings together a helpful survey of feminist critiques of what has become the canon of political theory, and an overview of how critical race, postcolonial, queer, and trans theories can intervene in canonical modes of thinking.