ON THE NOTION OF THE POLITICAL IN FEMINIST THEORY

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Abstract: The turn of the 1990s saw the emergence of “the political” in feminist theory. Despite there being a number of publications devoted to the theme, the concept itself has remained rather undertheorized. Instead of producing a thoroughly developed concept, it served to create an epistemic community devoted to the (supposedly dead, modernist) political aim of women’s emancipation. In the article, I argue that it would be beneficent for feminist theory to adopt an affirmative stance towards the contingency of politics. This of course poses a challenge to feminist politics, which still operates mainly within the framework of the politics of representation. Nevertheless, Linda Zerilli’s approach, which interprets contingency in an Arendtian vein as the condition of the world-creating and world-building power of feminism as a practice of freedom may prove to be a productive way of approaching the challenging issue of contingency in feminist theory.

Keywords: the political; political difference; contingency; feminist theory; world-building.

Introduction

In recent decades the concept of political difference has framed research in political theory. Briefly, political difference refers to a differentiation between a conventional understanding of politics (in the framework of the nation state, parliamentary democracy and the division of labor between political professionals and civil society) on the one hand, and the political, which is meant to refer to the contingent acts of founding, instituting and changing society. However, there are certain differences between the articulation of political difference within mainstream political theory and its articulation in feminist theory. In this article I firstly submit a genealogy of the concept of the political that has been a “symptom” of political difference in feminist theory. Secondly, I briefly explore engagement with the political in Linda Zerilli’s Arendtian theory.

Feminists theorize the political

Most probably it was Feminists Theorize the Political (Butler & Scott, 1992) that introduced the term “the political” into feminist theory and philosophy. The title of the book may seem redundant; it could be the subtitle of any other feminist publication. Were feminists ever preoccupied with something else? The issue of the political in feminist theory emerged at
a time of reflection on the ontological presuppositions of theory. But despite having been present in feminist theory for at least two decades, it is not a paradigmatic approach.

The concept of the political—in its rather non-conceptual form—has been present in feminist theory for at least twenty years. It is used occasionally and unsystematically. Its meaning is rather blurred and it cannot therefore be understood as a “proper” concept to be either relied on or contested. The political in feminist theory is not an “essentially contested concept” (W. B. Gallie; quoted in Connolly, 1993/1974, p. 1). It is a marker indicating something that still needs to be more thoroughly theoretically outlined. Its genealogy in the field of political philosophy is rather different: the term has been systematically explored over the past fifty years following Carl Schmitt’s *The concept of the political* (2007a/1927).

Nancy Fraser shares with us her understanding of the political in feminist theory, which predates the current use of the term. Fraser states that besides the institutional understanding of politics, “something is ‘political’ if it is contested across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range of different publics” (Fraser, 1989, pp.166-168). Furthermore Fraser’s critical-theoretical focus on the politicization of material needs strictly differentiates the political from the domains of the economic and the domestic.

In the 1990s, five books were published that promised to settle the issue of the political (Butler & Scott, 1992; Dean, 1997; Hirschmann & Di Stefano, 1996; Verloo & Schmidt-Gleim, 2003; Yeatman, 1994). In the past ten years the political has appeared in articles and polemics, which, I assume, were rather marginal in feminist political theory (Allen, 2007, 2009; Bauer, 2007; Gressgård, 2008; McAfee, 2005, 2007; Pratt, 2007; Zerilli, 2005). I doubt there is a set of characteristics of the political that could be taken from these discussions and elevated to the status of the coherent features of a concept. The political—an adjective turned substantive—has been faithful to the possibilities that lie in its adjectival form; it functioned as an attribute that could be attached to various—previously apolitical—issues. Thus one could describe the political as a field, a domain, consisting of entities that became political.

Butler and Scott (1992) identify the political with a set of positions in academic discourse and feminist politics. Their intention is to bypass the insistent presupposition of an ontologically grounded feminist subject and they do so by multiplying the positions from which the political can speak. Their main interest is to explore these locations, positions and their orchestration. Butler and Scott ask: “What are the political operations that constrain and constitute the field within which positions emerge?” (1992, p. xiv; emphasis in original). In reflecting on the political they ascribe a special position to poststructuralist theory, which was often criticized and labeled as the culprit responsible for the political crisis of feminism. According to Butler and Scott, poststructuralism “is not, strictly speaking, a position, but rather a critical interrogation of the exclusionary operations by which ‘positions’ are established” (p. xiv). The political therefore needs to be viewed as a domain of the multiplicity of feminist positions that emerge within it via an interplay of exclusionary practices. Jodi Dean, the editor of *Feminism and the new democracy: re-siting the political* (1997), explores this notion further. She identifies the political as “the fields of antagonism that have produced, structured and limited contemporary feminism” (Dean, 1997, p. 1). Thus the political assumes a multiplicity of actors and discursive positions, which Dean coins as the “new democracy”. A distinctive characteristic of the political as the new democracy is its re-siting. “Each new location [of the political] is to be understood
as requiring a new articulation of its constitutive political positions” (ibid., p. 3). In Dean’s feminist interpretation, re-siting the political diverts politics away from its boundaries, which are demarcated by a faithfulness to identity.

The contestability and undecidability of the positions labeled as feminist is the main characteristic of the political according to Anna Yeatman’s Postmodern revisioning of the political (1994). In Yeatman’s understanding, the consensual politics of difference is to be substituted with a nonconsensual politics informed by postcolonialism, and the democratic search for rational consensus is to give way to local, multilateral agreements between litigant parties.

The literature cited above sees the political as a multiplicity of exclusively defined political—feminist—positions embedded in the claims of the feminist political movement to feminist theory. If, however, the perspective of the feminist political movement is replaced with that of political theory/philosophy, the meaning of the political is modified. In Revisioning the political (Hirschmann & Di Stefano, 1996), editors Nancy Hirschmann and Christine di Stefano aim to redefine the political concepts and their understanding of politics. In their opinion, politics can be revised only secondarily; the revision of the disciplinary apparatus that apprehends politics must come first. Thus the political is a disciplinary toolbox to be used by researchers, i.e. it is a toolbox of canonized concepts and doctrines. The normative content and the need for correspondence between norms and descriptions mean that concepts and doctrines need to be questioned, altered and modified. Therefore the engagement of the political in Hirschmann’s and Di Stefano’s Revisioning the political is primarily disciplinary in form.

The urgency of the political can also be demonstrated in writing that has remained marginal until now. In 2002, Verloo and Schmidt-Gleim published their One more feminist manifesto on the political (2003), which aimed to re-direct feminist political theory towards its utopian dimension. The political is imaginatively prefigured in the body of Principesse (obviously a reference to Machiavelli’s Principe), who is to represent gender struggle, “the principle of ongoing change and continuous reconstruction” (Verloo & Schmidt-Gleim, 2003, p.15). The rhetorical pathos of the manifesto is strengthened by the plural authorial voice and other unconventional stylistic devices, which together present the issue of the political in feminist theory with a rare urgency.

It might seem to us that these approaches to the political do not provide us with a new perspective on the term. The political is identified as multiplicities, as transforming and widening domains of politics, as revisions, re-siting, and repeating theorizations. The term is emphatically stated and reinstated as if the political was nothing but emphasis. On my reading, these approaches to the political are not aiming for a precise conceptual analysis. The term political is used more as a marker of the commitment feminist theorists needed to demonstrate towards the emancipatory ideals of feminism—ideals which became rather imprecise and unclear after the poststructuralist and highly theoretical turn in feminist theory.¹ As Anna Yeatman has stated, the political signifies a postmodern moment in

¹ Naturally, what is defined as feminism very much depends on how the political is understood. Mary Dietz provides us with an exhaustive definition of feminism, which—thanks to its essence—can be deemed malleable enough to accommodate the multiple forms feminism takes: “feminism is
the—presumably modernist—emancipatory politics of feminism (Yeatman, 1994, p. vii). This leads me to think of the concept of the political in feminist theory not as a particular contested entity, domain, or field. Instead it was meant to demarcate those using the term, i.e. an epistemic community that does not identify politics with the idiosyncratic particular subversive practices of women (see e.g. Mahmood, 2004). This epistemic community had been questioning the way in which politics was understood, but at the same time it had not come up with a theoretical concept that would affirm the contingent character of politics. Therefore I now turn to accounts of the political in recent democratic political theory, which approaches the political as the ontological foundation of politics.

The contingency of the political and political difference

The concept of the political as used in democratic political theory indicates a willingness to grapple with the impossibility of laying down the foundations of society within a foundationalist paradigm, which Marchart states is “represented scientifically by such diverse species as economic determinism, behaviorism, positivism, sociologism and so on” (Marchart, 2007, p. 5). The recent ‘political difference paradigm’ differentiates on the one hand between empirical politics, which is a subsystem of society, and the conditions enabling it, that is, the political, on the other hand. Both Marchart and Chantal Mouffe (2005) see political difference as being analogical to ontological difference: while politics plays out on the ontic level, the political lies in the ontological level. In the case of feminist theory, the critique of foundationalism has turned into a critique of the subject of women and that is no longer viewed as a valid grounding of feminist politics (see Butler, 1990).

What, then, is the status of the foundations? Does looking for the contours of politics post foundations mean looking for politics without foundations? If it were possible to identify the condition of politics as the absence of foundations, would not precisely the absence of foundations, i.e. a positively formulated negativity, become the foundation of politics again? According to Marchart, anti-foundationalism is merely an inflection of the hegemonic discourse of foundationalism. Instead of reversing foundationalism, what should be attempted is “the subversion of the very terrain on which foundationalism operates, a subversion of foundationalist premises—and not their denial” (Marchart, 2007, p. 13).

In Judith Butler’s view, the foundations cannot be done away with: “It seems that theory posits foundations incessantly, and forms implicit metaphysical commitments as a matter of course, even when it seeks to guard against it; foundations function as the unquestioned and the unquestionable within any theory” (Butler, 1992, p. 7). The particularity of any theoretical activity cannot be overturned or ameliorated either by a theoretician developing a better methodology that sets the theoretical debate or by an attempt to broaden the foundation of any historically constituted, local and global, social and political movement with an emancipatory purpose and a normative content. It posits a subject (women), identifies a problem (the subjection and objectification of women through gendered relations), and expresses various aims (e.g., overturning relations of domination; ending sex discrimination; securing female sexual liberation; fighting for women’s rights and interests, raising ‘consciousness’, transforming institutional and legal structures; engendering democracy) in the name of specific principles (e.g., equality, rights, liberty, autonomy, dignity, self-realization, recognition, respect, justice, freedom)” (Dietz, 2003, p. 399).
and open it up to various inclusions. Postulating foundations and the implicit commitments stemming from that are part and parcel of any theorizing. However, it does not follow that foundations should not be instituted at all. Provided there is recognition that inevitably exclusions will occur when the foundations are established, the foundations will “expose the foundational premise as a contingent and contestable presumption” (Butler, 1992, p. 7).

In political theory conceiving of the political as the “foundation” of politics, the foundations therefore exist, yet they are incessantly deferred, they cannot be deemed the “last instance” (in Althusserian parlance). Since any foundation has to be prevented from becoming a foundation in the last instance, there must be a plurality of contingent foundations. In order to prevent any foundation from becoming the very last foundation, the contingency of the foundations is necessary.

Marchart (2007) distinguishes between the theories of political difference in relation to their reliance on this strong version of contingency. The traditional—weak—version of contingency states that what is, is neither impossible nor necessary and therefore it could be different. The strong theory of contingency, however, states that being neither impossible nor necessary is itself necessary:

The strong notion of contingency thus ties the possibility of identity as such, inseparably, to the impossibility of its full (= non-contingent) achievement, thereby affirming the paradoxical or aporetical necessity of that tie between possibility and impossibility. In this sense, contingency can be used—and this in fact is the preferred usage of contingency in our own investigation—as an operational term indicating the necessary impossibility, in scientific terms, of systemic closure or, in ontological terms, of the full beingness of beings or ground (Marchart, 2007, pp. 28-29).

The danger for the political consists in its displacement2 to forms of politics that do not attend to contingent foundations, but rather cement, sublime or neutralize them.3 When diagnosing Western societies in the 20th century, Hannah Arendt criticized the expansion of the administration (and bureaucratization) of society to the detriment of the flourishing of the political. Carl Schmitt in his The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations (2007b/1929) points to a similar process, that of successive shifts in the central domains over the past four centuries (from the theological to metaphysical and then to the humanitarian–moral and economic domain). The centrality of the domain designates the discourses and practices that guarantee agreement with regard to emerging problems, that feed into society’s self-understanding and as such they minimize the potential emergence of conflict. “If a domain of thought becomes central, then the problems of other domains are solved in terms of the central domain—they are considered secondary problems, whose solution follows as a matter of course only if the problems of the central domain are solved” (Schmitt, 2007b/1929, p. 86). Barša, Slačálek and Stöckelová (2010) provide us with yet another version of depoliticization. In their view, depoliticization now takes the shape of normalization, economization, essentialization, individualization, expertization, moralization and decontextualization. (Depoliticized politics

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2 We can think of the displacement of politics as the process of depoliticization.
3 The displacement of the political from the disciplinary field of political theory is harshly criticized by Bonnie Honig (1993) and Jacques Ranciere (1999, pp. 61-94).
is based on foundations consisting of economics, a racialized and gender human essence expert knowledge, and morality.) In their opinion, the number and scope of the Schmittian central domains becomes substantially diversified and broader, which might make us think that the potential for re-activating the political is thus significantly circumscribed.

A “scandal of the political” emerges: the contingency of the political poses a serious problem for the strategic agency of political agents in the juridical discourse of politics, and yet, it contests the self-assured commonplace status of the subjects of politics. Nevertheless, there is a countermovement that permanently domesticates, silences and neutralizes the contingency of the political, for instance, in the notions of good governance, fiscal neutrality and rational choice theory. To put it differently, the political tirelessly challenges the favored politics. The “scandal” of the political is found in the mutual conditioning of politics and its contingent foundation. It produces a constant tension between the processes of politicization and depoliticization.

Zerilli’s critique of depoliticized feminism

Where does feminism stand with regard to the contradictory shifts from politicization to depoliticization? Has it retained the politicizing character it undoubtedly had at the peak of the second wave of feminism in Western Europe and the US? In contrast to the complacency of various feminist actors regarding their own subversiveness, feminist political theorist Linda Zerilli (2005) points to two depoliticizing, though commonsensical and very well established notions of feminism—feminism considered mainly as either a social or a subject question.

By social question Zerilli means feminist concerns with social welfare problems that are the subject of much of social theory and feminist interventions in policy-making. However, a problem arises for Zerilli, since—in her view “[t]he assimilation of the political to the social restricts political action to an instrumental, means-ends activity that entails the micro- and macro-management of social relations” (Zerilli, 2005, p. 3). The criteria for measuring the success of such politics is expediency, through which the actions and judgments of citizens can be substituted for those of experts. The goals of social justice and social utility are undoubtedly noble, but they also prompt other questions: do we value women’s freedom because it is useful in solving certain social problems? Is the social question framing of feminist politics appropriate where women’s freedom interferes with social utility?

The subject question, on other hand, is complicated by the predominant understanding in which the subject is seen as being sovereign, that is, an understanding which identifies freedom with free will and/or freedom of choice. However, in Zerilli’s and Arendt’s understanding, freedom does not require this volitional intention; instead, it requires enabling conditions that can change the “I will” of the acting subject into “I can”. Freedom means emancipation from what was before, in the past, or, to quote Arendt, it is “[…] the freedom to call something into being which did not exist before, which was not given, not even as an object of cognition or imagination, and which therefore, strictly speaking, could not be known” (Arendt, 1961, p. 150). Freedom cannot be conceived of by an individual intentionally and the individual cannot project it into her future, since it is not an attribute of an individual. Freedom can occur only when a plurality of people get together, talk and act, and expose themselves to others not by completely controlling their own actions, but being ‘subject’ vul-
nerable to others. Free action is not determined by its preliminary motive or intended goal; although these goals and intentions may be present, they are surpassed in free action.

Zerilli’s feminist project intertwines with Arendt’s non-feminist project in order to use the many facets of contingency as a starting point for feminist politics. According to Zerilli, serious consideration of contingency implies a feminism seen as acting for world-building. Political acting then consists of creating “public spaces in which something is said that changes what can be heard as a political claim” (Zerilli, 2005, pp. 23-24). In order for a public space like this to come into existence, the force of contingency has to be affirmed. As Zerilli shows, “[C]ontingency is a familiar word in contemporary feminist theory, but it has been hard to see it as the condition of the world-creating and world-building power of feminism as a practice of freedom” (2005, pp. 24-25; emphasis in original). Contingency can be interpreted as threatening arbitrariness, or even as the voluntarism of political actors. Indeed, vindicating contingency brings both the risks and thrills of jumping over the abyss of freedom. The literary and journalistic topos of “a leap in the dark” (Sprung ins Dunklen), which accompanied the debate on women’s and working men’s suffrage at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, precisely depicts these anxieties (see Bock, 2002).

Contingency, then, could indicate the unpredictability, undecidability and the ever-surprising, even miraculous, side to acting in public, the sphere of appearance which Hannah Arendt held in high esteem. Contingency describes a realm of action in which no agent is in complete control of the process, its outcome and its end. Thus agency is not subject-centered, but world-oriented. In the world, in the sphere of appearance, human beings act, perform and disclose themselves. Their activities are talked about, canonized, given as examples to be followed and affirmed via public speech. As Arendt states, “to be political, to live in a polis, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence” (Arendt, 1958, p. 26). The contingency informing the fabric of the political and the social plays a positively subversive role in the search for a non-sovereign, non-volitional, concept of action.

The arbitrariness of action, which is often thought of as frightening, Arendt says, is the price of freedom. At the point of a new beginning, women and men of action find themselves in an aporia—the legitimacy of their new beginning is at stake. According to Zerilli, the abyssal nature of free action has to be retained and built upon. There is no ultimate ground for action. Once a person gives their grounds for their decision to act in a particular way, there is not, as Wittgenstein reminds us, “an ungrounded presupposition; it is an ungrounded way of acting” (quoted in Zerilli, 2005, p. 46). The search for the foundations of action can only be successful retrospectively. Action reveals itself only at the end and it is given meaning by those who make a story out of it and tell the story not so that it is not forgotten but rather so it can be emulated.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to map out the current feminist uses of the concept of the political and bring the notion of contingency to the foreground of political-theoretical and feminist-theoretical interests. It has considered Zerilli’s notion of feminism as world-building, following Arendt’s conceptualizations, as a way out of depoliticizing the work of feminism.
(which took on the guise of feminism as social and subject questions). Despite the now already well-established preoccupation of feminists with Arendt (who was first rejected as being blatantly anti-woman, see Honig, 1995), Arendtian notions need to be explored further.

References


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