

SYMPOSIUM

Feminist Practice Meets Feminist Theory

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It is always welcome to have a smart, committed feminist engage seriously with big questions of social and political theory, all the more so when her work takes the variety of writings considered “radical feminist theory” seriously enough to make them a central part of her project without simultaneously limiting herself only to those works. Zerilli’s *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* puts thinkers as different from one another as Hannah Arendt and the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Emmanuel Kant and Monique Wittig into the same paragraphs, if not the same sentences. Moreover, her argument also offers a Eurocentric impulse to push American feminists past the stale equality–difference debate and the anxiety about collective action by “women” that seems to accompany it here. As a person who works on European feminism, I especially appreciate this attention to feminist writings about collective action that have not received the attention in the United States that they merit. Finally, Zerilli deserves a third round of applause for taking the rhetorical work of claims-making as the serious political action that I also think it is. Rather than taking political arguments as merely “theory,” she considers them as efficacious in their own terms, as means of making political subjects and actions “real-izable” by opening up new spaces in which struggles can and do occur.

To meaningfully grant her those three kudos, this essay outlines the sense of her argument for those who have not yet read the book, as well as evaluates some of her claims. To do so, I take up each of these three praiseworthy contributions in more detail. I then turn to ask a few questions about the limits of her arguments, particularly as they might apply to creating the actual spaces for action that she expects political claims to do.

The first thing to note about the work of feminist theoretical reflection that Zerilli offers is the scope of the previous work that she draws into her frame of reference. What Zerilli actually means by the “abyss of freedom” is the radical uncertainty about the outcomes of their actions that challenges all actors who seek to “make a difference” in the world. But a second “abyss” addressed by Zerilli is the gulf usually seen between the philosophical concerns and approaches with which she deals. On the one side, she anchors herself in two of the classic authors of non-feminist political philosophy, Emmanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt. On the other side, she builds directly upon two classics of contemporary European feminist theory—Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* (1969/1985) and the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective’s manifesto. This latter book was actually translated into English under the title of **Q4** *Sexual Difference* (1987/1990), but as Zerilli points out, would more properly have been called “What’s Wrong with Rights.” Stretching herself across the vast gulf between the classic thinkers on politics and second-wave feminists who attempt to theorize from their political practices, Zerilli attempts to provide a bridge strong enough to support liberatory feminist political claims.

To construct such a structure across the chasm of theory created by the different political concerns of each of the authors she examines, Zerilli spins a strong but flexible web of argument. Her technique is to pull out a number of discrete threads from each source and gradually weave them into a single, more or less smooth fabric. This makes it sometimes hard to see the jarringly different tones and textures of each of her four central sources. Certainly, the central arguments the authors advance explicitly

in each of these texts are dramatically different. And it far exceeds my capacities as a critic to unweave the fabric of the argument, examine the various threads, and evaluate whether the uses to which they are put are sufficiently consistent with their original contexts to be considered philosophically legitimate. Moreover, for sociological theory, I presume that the interest that this book holds lies less in the detailed texture of the threads than in the pattern of the political argument that results. Although focusing next on this pattern itself, I would do Zerilli a disservice if I did not first acknowledge the remarkable achievement she has created by imaginatively bridging this gulf of thought with her skillful weave of ideas.

The common pattern that she weaves across this theoretical chasm uses as its warp threads the claim that most feminist theories have become too “subject centered” in trying to place identity rather than action at their core. Basing her argument on Arendt’s notion of politics as a struggle among persons who choose the aims that they represent, she challenges both subjective and objective notions of identity as a ground for politics. She asserts that neither how one subjectively experiences or does one’s gender oneself nor the social category of identity or oppression in which one is seen by others as appropriately placed will ever adequately define a political actor, whether individual or collective, because both operate out of a present experience rather than a vision of the possible. The woof threads of the argument come particularly from Wittig’s fantasy of collective female freedom in which “elles” or the collective female subject displace “ils” as the taken-for-granted general case, and thus produce imaginatively something wholly new that, once imagined, could potentially be brought into existence by political action.

The pattern of the book thus formed by these key ideas is one in which action and indeterminacy figure centrally and where risk-taking is an essential feature of all politics. Her own “risky” strategy is to rely on non-U.S. feminist theorists who are relatively early and underappreciated in the United States. While this is itself a second special pleasure for those of us engaged with the European feminist movements that found these authors so very important for their own development, Zerilli’s choice of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective and Monique Wittig as two of her most central authors is also a form of subtle resistance to the ongoing Butler boom in feminist theorizing. Zerilli does not ignore or undervalue Judith Butler’s ideas, but she does place them in a profoundly different context. Indeed, she succeeds in even making Butler seem less deeply radical because her claims are more about individual identities and less centrally concerned with what she considers the essence of the political, the space between people as actors, the common ground of a relationship in which both the self and the other are taken as free. One’s political actions are thus not taken in relationship to a reified structural condition like heteronormativity but in real interrelationship with other women and men who contest these actions with their own; either affirmation or refusal is possible in such relational spaces. This foregrounds the third virtue of Zerilli’s work, its focus on political claimsmaking as being a self-efficacious form of political action, not mere “rhetoric.”

Although distancing herself from their projects, Zerilli appears to me to be offering more of a refinement than a repudiation of the insights offered by American feminist theorists Judith Butler and Joan Scott. In my view, they have earned the great influence they are having globally in shaping feminist political theorizing by dislodging easy categorizations of gender and feminism. Butler and Scott have offered important interventions into political feminism that I think are somewhat mischaracterized by Zerilli. Her critiques of identity politics present them as offering a distinctive “third-wave feminist” perspective on gender politics that could be repaired by a return to a more overtly political second-wave agenda of the “liberation of women” rather than “transformation of gender relations.”

Because I see the focus on both aspects of social change as simultaneously important, I think Zerilli's false opposition between "second-wave" and "third-wave" views not only underplays the extent to which both perspectives were actually developing fairly simultaneously in the mid 1980s and early 1990s but also leaves the practical work of claims-making underspecified. Both the interactional level, which Butler emphasizes, and the institutional level, which Scott examines more closely, are also arenas for politics that could be more integrated into Zerilli's view of collective self-organization of women as a practice of politics. Still, Zerilli is doing a great theoretical service by putting human relationships and the profoundly human potential of speech and choice on the table, reclaiming some of the radical potential that Butler and Scott attributed to speech acts.

Zerilli resists the tendency to reduce such speech to either identity work or abstract choice, just as she resists framing political choice to their liberal versions of either economic rationality or contract theory, in both of which she uses Kant and Arendt quite nicely to counter. Claims-making is for her a profoundly political work of self-articulation in relationship with others. What the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective of Italian feminists and Monique Wittig, as a French imaginative writer, add to the picture is their ability actually to imagine women in the actual process of emerging as collective subjects, not as purely individual ones.

Like Ute Gerhard (1990/2001), an interdisciplinary German feminist social scientist, (whom Zerilli cites approvingly but does not further pursue), Wittig and the Milanese find grounds to reject egalitarianism as an approach to rights that is too formal and too male-defined. They seek instead to imagine an alternative collective claims-making process by women on behalf of women that does not collapse into the categoricism that Scott (1996), Butler (1990), Connell (1987), Hill Collins (1990) and others were—also in this same period—showing to be untenable. Working with European texts as she does makes Zerilli's book an important counter to the rights-centered stream of American feminist thought that is quick to dismiss Wittig and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective as "difference feminism" and thus as incompatible with either social diversity among women or gaining rights as a political project suited for feminists. One of Zerilli's goals seems to be to rescue the radical democratic aims of these theorists from the knee-jerk categorical interpretations of their thinking. By interpreting these two radical feminist texts as instead "allowing" a collective subject to emerge in the political process of democratic claims-making, of producing "women" as a political act itself, and one of uncertain consequences, Zerilli offers a way to think about making claims for rights that does not privilege an individual, contractual, legalistic, and not coincidentally male-centered version of feminist politics. Insofar as both European and American feminists have come to rely more and more on state-centered policy making as a means of political action and have looked to feminist "expertise" to make their case, the attention Zerilli pays to a collective project that is interactional and relational from the grassroots up offers a radical reorienting perspective.

But given the continuing European emphasis on helping and supporting women as a group, and on turning the collective political subject "women" into the aggregate policy object "woman," the chief function of Zerilli's rethinking will be very different for them than for Americans. The American resistance to collective subjects and objects is not only a feature of our liberal gender politics but is a pervasive aspect of American exceptionalism overall. Thus the taint of "difference" thinking has an element of rhetorical discredit in the American context that it lacks in Europe, which may account for the absence of attention to the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective here in the United States, even though it provided a core text for debate in most European

countries in the late 1980s. While “difference” theorists in the United States like Carol Gilligan (1982) and Deborah Tannen (1990) have found considerable resonance among popular readers, American feminists interested in politics and policy making vigorously resist their blandishments.

The fear that “special policy” *for* women is the necessary outcome of seeing women act collectively *as* women is what Zerilli seems at special pains to rebut, and this appears also to be part of the appeal to her that Arendt’s distinction between the social and the political can offer. Yet, even though this is a direction in which many European feminists working on policy issues seem to have taken their versions of difference feminism, it does not seem to be as generally a feature of women doing politics, as her concerns with it suggest. The American feminist application of her theoretical work lies in a quite different direction.

It is a shame that this book is so densely written as a classic philosophical tome, since Zerilli’s arguments might help nudge American feminists away from seeing “equal rights” as the defining feature of what feminism is about, without trying to redeem “difference” as some categorical property that women have or conceding any epistemological privilege to any configuration of categorical oppression. Zerilli offers a dense but eloquent condemnation of the “victim discourse” into which such claims for privilege leads. As she says, real women are not able to see themselves in the one-dimensional figure of the oppressed victim. Cognitive acceptance of “women’s” sorry state as a social fact and emotional rejection of oppressed victim as a livable identity can certainly lead to the three-sex theory that I have encountered among students: “there’s men, there’s women and there’s me.” The actual embrace of feminism, however, has never seemed to me to involve such an identity anymore than it would call for some dichotomous choice of men or women as objects of identification, affection, and struggle that Zerilli still seems to take more or less for granted.

Overall, Zerilli’s stated objective is to “return” feminism to being what she calls a theory of freedom rather than a theory concerned with either equal rights or gender differences. Her focus on women’s liberation—a theory of freedom—attempts to recapture the 1970s sense that women had to achieve their own liberation *as* women, rather than joining a “male movement” that would eventually extend rights and benefits to women as a reward for their support. Of course, the idea of women as a category acting on “their own behalf” proved both theoretically and politically insupportable over the following decades, and Zerilli locates the collapse of “women’s liberation” as political project in the “crisis” of the subject category women. If this categorization is not more “true” than all its competitors, on what can its political claims rest? In the loss of women as a political subject, Zerilli fears a return to seeing women instrumentally, that is, to viewing women’s rights and political power as means to other ends, be it the victory of small-d democracy or that of the capital-D Democratic Party.

While these are for Zerilli—as for me—social goods devoutly to be desired, she does—and in my opinion correctly—follow Arendt in making a sharp distinction between the social and the political as values. In her possibly controversial reading of Arendt, the social is defined as the goods that institutions like markets, families, and states can distribute or redistribute and the relationships governed by producing, sharing, and consuming these goods. The political can and does affect the social, but should never be reduced to it; it is a higher realm of self-realization. The struggles to express one’s self and achieve recognition by others are where Zerilli locates the political. For her, the political actions of making claims, the rhetorical opportunity to discover “new words” and thereby think genuinely new thoughts, and the political decision to affirm or refuse community and affiliation are the heart of the feminist

project.

Like Arendt, she assigns to this realm of “the political,” with all its indeterminate and inherently unending struggles, the ultimate meaning of freedom. This freedom to be a political actor is for her the essence of democracy, and the freedom to act (and be recognized or not as a meaningful political actor) is one that she argues belongs just as much to self-asserting collectives as to self-asserting individuals, in both cases resting on no firmer foundation than the claim and, crucially, its recognition by others.

Acting in and for freedom risks non-recognition, the “abyss” of uncertainty caused by any non-compelled action having non-determinate outcomes, and thus may inspire fear. In the argument that Zerilli weaves, it is this fear of freedom that inspires historically determinist theories of social change, socially determinist theories of categorical politics, politically determinist theories of rights and contracts as self-enforcing, and psychologically determinist theories of identity and meaning. Political action itself—and speech as a crucial form of political action—is the core element making society. Because such actions are free, we are responsible for them—whether we act or think that we are not acting, which is itself an action. And this responsibility is ours, both individually and collectively, in the communities of action we create by what we affirm or refuse. Even when we cannot know the outcome of standing with any particular women (or men) in any particular struggle, it is this free action that makes feminist politics both feminist and political.

Now for some final, more critical notes. While I think it would be an oversimplification of Zerilli’s argument to reduce the social to what Nancy Fraser (1989) called redistribution and see the political as just another name for what Fraser termed “recognition politics,” there certainly is some affinity between Fraser and Zerilli, even if only in their bracketing of arguments about redistribution as a narrow and misleading model of politics. I appreciate the critical stance that Zerilli takes toward “instrumentalized” gender politics, where the issue of what women’s empowerment should be thought of as “good for” dominates, as it does in much economic and social development discourse today. I concur that instrumentalizing women’s rights as signs of modernity, democracy, progress, or any other social good implies losing sight of women’s freedom as a good in its own right. But I doubt Zerilli’s diagnosis of this instrumentalization as being at its heart the same problem as those that are roiling the U.S. and European feminist movements and that makes it difficult in practice to stand “for women.”

Indeed, the issues that are most difficult for practical feminist politics are not the same in any meaningful sense even in the European Union (EU) and the United States, let alone for feminists and women’s movements worldwide. On the one hand, the “recognition struggles” over immigration, EU citizenship, and the intersection of gender politics with diversity politics in issues like wearing a headscarf or gender-based electoral quotas are deeply unsettling to feminists in Europe. On the other hand, U.S. feminists who can easily shrug off the importance of headscarves and have no party structures in which quotas would be meaningful are struggling instead to confront the redistribution crisis ushered in by America’s new Gilded Age. How one does redistribution politics is also profoundly about standing with and for certain people, but it is not so clearly distinct from the social and instrumental ideas of politics that Zerilli—with Arendt—critiques.

Nor is it as obvious as Zerilli would have it that either of these struggles can be resolved by a commitment to take political risks in imagining a collective empowerment of women as a self-liberating act. Her skepticism toward the increasing

feminist “march through the institutions” of conventional politics is not matched with a critical consideration of how collective efforts at the grassroots level, such as the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, worked out in actual political practice. Although their book frames their struggle as a successful claim to speak and be recognized as women in relation to other women, a fair picture of the contested and uncertain nature of politics that Zerilli affirms should also lead her to look at those who rejected this approach, the unanticipated outcomes (both good and bad) that grew out of these practices, and the continued efforts by members of the collective to practice freedom outside this very particular context.

In this sense, Zerilli’s effort to resolve an allegedly general feminist crisis of theory may not be as useful to actual feminist movements as she thinks it should be. Even if feminist activists were inclined to wade through this sort of work of feminist theory, which despite Butler’s roaring success, I tend to doubt, Zerilli’s defense of a collective feminist subject who can risk making claims and is constituted in the action of making such a claim does not help to guide feminists confronted with concrete problems of claims-making or coalition-building, which are indeed always contextual, contingent, and uncertain. But that is also what Zerilli herself would say, and not knowing what outcome her intervention into feminist debates would have, she still took the risk of making it and having it refused. I applaud these efforts and hope that others will also appreciate her rhetorical intervention as the contribution to women’s liberation that she has made here.

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